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MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

**Commander's Intent of Major General Joseph Hooker during the
Chancellorsville Campaign**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Title: Commander's Intent of Major General Joseph Hooker during the Chancellorsville Campaign

Author: Major William M. Jurney, USMC

Thesis: Did "Fighting Joe" Hooker of the Army of the Potomac lose his nerve during the Chancellorsville Campaign of 1863? Perhaps history has failed to recognize Major General Joseph Hooker's true commander's intent for this campaign. Hooker's intent was simple: maneuver forces to Lee's flank and rear in order to force a withdrawal of Confederate troops from Fredericksburg. Hooker had no intention of engaging in a "risky confrontation" with General Robert E. Lee and the Army of Northern Virginia.

Discussion: Hooker's approach for planning his spring offensive would focus the Army of Potomac's efforts toward outmaneuvering Lee's Army of Northern Virginia. Hooker had put forth the idea of moving on Richmond and Lincoln advised him that his objective was Lee's army and not Richmond. Hooker does pursue Lee's army, as the main objective and not Richmond as the President had directed but the means that Hooker pursued to that end are misleading. Hooker entered what he considered the initial stage of his spring offensive at Chancellorsville thinking that he would first defeat Lee's army by maneuver. Prior to Chancellorsville, however, Hooker was already making preparations for driving to Richmond.

Hooker had intended to confront Lee with the dilemma of being threatened from all sides. Unfortunately, Hooker had failed to communicate his intentions for his army's movements of May 1, 1863 and confusion ran rampant among his subordinate commanders. Almost exclusively, Hooker developed the actual details of the plan himself. This flaw would result in numerous disconnects in Hooker's plan.

Fully aware of Lee's supply situation, Hooker believed that if Lee's lines were cut, he would have to respond to protect them by retreating. In addition to threatening Lee's supply lines, Hooker also believed that his planned actions would flank Lee out of his fortified positions, as Lee would be squeezed between two of Hooker's main elements. In the event that Lee did not move to oppose the Union's maneuvers, Hooker planned to assume a tactical defense. That Lee would choose to fight instead of retreat was beyond Hooker's consideration. Hooker remained unshaken in his conviction that Lee would be forced to retreat.

Conclusions: Hooker's plan would fail due to his own steadfast belief in the ability of his plan to force Lee to withdraw. To say that Lee defeated the Army of the Potomac is misleading because Lee did not defeat the army, he defeated Hooker as he fought a very effective defensive battle that removed the Federal threat from Virginia due to Hooker's failings as an army commander.

Table of Contents

	<i>Page</i>
MMS Cover Sheet.....	i
Disclaimer.....	ii
Executive Summary	iii
Table of Contents	iv
List of Illustrations.....	v
Introduction.....	1
Analysis of Influences on Hooker's Intent	2
Strategic Setting	3
Preparation Phase.....	7
Hooker's Decision Making Process.....	9
Development of the Campaign Plan.....	14
Hooker's Concept of Operations	18
What's the Plan	21
Analysis of Hooker's Intent During Execution.....	25
Cavalry Action and Inaction.....	25
A Change to the Plan, or Was It	27
To Steal a March on Lee.....	31
What's Lee Doing	33
Attack, Defend, or Wait	35
Our Enemy must Ingloriously Fly	39
Lee's Retreating, or Is he.....	45
Back Across the River	48
Conclusions.....	50
Bibliography.....	62

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List of Illustrations

	<i>Page</i>
Figure 1. Overview.....	55
Figure 2. April 27-30, 1863	56
Figure 3. May 1, 1863	57
Figure 4. May 2, 1863	58
Figure 5. May 3, 1863	59
Figure 6. May 4, 1863	60
Figure 7. May 6, 1863	61

INTRODUCTION

Did “Fighting Joe” Hooker of the Army of the Potomac lose his nerve during the Chancellorsville Campaign of 1863? Perhaps history has failed to recognize Major General Joseph Hooker’s true commander’s intent for this campaign. Hooker’s intent was simple: maneuver forces to Lee’s flank and rear in order to force a withdrawal of Confederate troops from Fredericksburg.

General Hooker had no intention of entering into a decisive battle with the Army of Northern Virginia during his first major action as the Commander of the Army of the Potomac. Given the previous succession of unsuccessful field generals, Hooker was under political pressures from President Abraham Lincoln, who remained profoundly disturbed by the war’s progress and by his inability to translate solid strategic decisions into successful campaigns. This perception compelled Hooker to minimize all possible risks in developing the plans for his first major action as the new commander. If he could achieve a “risk free” victory, he would certainly establish himself as a worthy commander. Additionally, Hooker had recently instituted important organizational reforms and had taken great steps to improve discipline and to restore morale following the Battle of Fredericksburg. The effectiveness of these changes had not been tested yet. Therefore, given the circumstances of the new commander’s political perceptions and an untested army, General Hooker’s plan of attack for Chancellorsville was not an attack at all. Hooker had no intention of engaging in a “risky confrontation” with General Robert E. Lee and the Army of Northern Virginia.

The most commonly accepted rationale for the events of Chancellorsville is that Hooker “lost his nerve” and simply failed to carry through with the plan to destroy the Army of Northern Virginia. In contrast, I believe that he never intended to decisively engage, but rather through a planned maneuver and show of force, to establish himself as a worthy commander and gain a “safe” victory. Hooker’s primary intent was simply to force Lee to withdraw. History records the ensuing paralysis that befell Hooker when General Lee did not react to his flanking maneuvers as anticipated. Hooker did consider an alternative course of action or “branch plan.” His branch plan of action, in case Lee failed to withdraw, was for the Army of the Potomac to continue the strategic offense by means of a tactical defense rather than an assault on the Army of Northern Virginia. If this situation were to occur, as history reflects that it did, then Hooker believed Lee would be forced to engage him on ground of his own choosing. Hooker believed that in executing this branch plan, he would attain a position of advantage over Lee, which would still achieve his original intent. Without question, General Hooker failed to take advantage of many opportunities during the battle of Chancellorsville, which may illustrate his “loss of nerve.” His actions, however, may also be reflective of his rigid insistence on holding to his initial commander’s intent for this campaign.

ANALYSIS OF INFLUENCES ON HOOKER’S INTENT

In order to understand Hooker’s intent and his subsequent actions at Chancellorsville, I will first examine key factors leading up to the spring offensive of 1863. In light of the upcoming campaign, I will also examine Hooker’s past experiences, his capabilities and limitations, and those factors, which significantly impacted his planning and decision-making

processes. Ultimately, this examination will come to terms with how these factors combined to shape Hooker's overall actions as the Commander of the Army of the Potomac.

Strategic Setting

By the summer of 1862 President Lincoln had assembled the fundamental elements of an effective High Command and had determined a realistic strategy to achieve Union war aims. The naïve and limited objectives of 1861 had been replaced by the realization of the war's true cost and the acceptance of more practical and mature war aims. Unconditional surrender, the abolition of slavery and the subsequent transformation of southern culture would become the underpinnings of the Union war effort. Lincoln's greatest challenge was to maintain the collective will of the North, and in order to do this, he was determined to pursue an offensive strategy that would yield timely and positive results. Despite regular and strategically relevant victories in the Western Theater and moderate successes in the East, the Union had proven itself incapable of achieving the decisive results in Virginia that were deemed essential to the defeat of the Confederacy.

After the Federal debacle at Fredericksburg in December of 1862, President Lincoln replaced the incompetent Ambrose Burnside with "Fighting" Joseph Hooker as Commander of the Army of the Potomac. Across the Rappahannock River at Fredericksburg was Lee's Army of Northern Virginia, still resting in their winter camp. General Hooker inherited a badly beaten and badly demoralized army when he took command of the Army of the Potomac on January 25, 1863. President Lincoln, having once again decided to replace the leader of the Army of the Potomac, had opted for Hooker, an 1837 West Point artilleryman and veteran of the Peninsula

Campaign, Second Manassas, South Mountain, Antietam, and Fredericksburg. Hooker had acquired the nickname "Fighting Joe" while serving in the Peninsula Campaign. The nickname actually arose from an error caused by an editor's leaving out a punctuation mark. The article should have read "Still Fighting--Joe Hooker" but was printed as "Fighting Joe Hooker." Hooker hated the moniker, but the nickname stuck. From that day on, he was called "Fighting Joe Hooker" by his troops.¹

Major General Hooker had served as one of Burnside's three Grand Division commanders throughout the fighting at Fredericksburg. His attitude toward Burnside had bordered on the insubordinate, which reflected his indifferent support of the army commander's plan of action, vague and unsound as that plan was. Throughout his service, Hooker was well known for his tendency to criticize his superiors. Additionally, Hooker had served with some controversy preceding the Battle of Antietam at South Mountain as Burnside's right wing commander. Hooker's Corps fought well, as did the other Corps; however, his report filed in late 1862 was full of misrepresentations in what appeared to be an effort on Hooker's part to grab all the glory of the battle at the expense of his comrades. The combination of Hooker's South Mountain report and his attitude at Fredericksburg convinced Burnside that Hooker needed to be relieved. Burnside met with Lincoln and disclosed the order calling for Hooker's relief. Burnside requested that the President endorse the following or accept his resignation:

"General Joseph Hooker, major-general of volunteers and brigadier general U.S. Army, having been **guilty of unjust and unnecessary criticisms of the actions of his superior officers**, and of the authorities, and having, by the general tone of his conversation, endeavored to create distrust in the minds of officers, who have associated with him, and having, by omissions and otherwise, made reports and statements which were calculated to create incorrect impressions, and for **habitually speaking in disparaging terms** of the other officers, is hereby dismissed from the service of the United States as a man unfit to

¹ Stephen W. Sears, Chancellorsville (Boston, New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1996), 56.

hold an important commission during a crisis like the present, when so much patience, charity, confidence, consideration, and patriotism are due from every soldier in the field. This order is issued subject to the approval of the President of the United States.”²

Despite Burnside’s request to relieve Hooker, the President elected to appoint Hooker as the Commander of the Army of the Potomac. Lincoln went on to write the following to Hooker on January 26, 1863, the day after he assumed command:

“I have placed you at the head of the Army of the Potomac. Of course I have done this upon what appear to me to be sufficient reasons. And yet I think it best for you to know that there are some things, in regard to which, **I am not quite satisfied with you**. I believe you to be a brave and a skillful soldier, which, of course, I like. I also believe you do not mix politics with your profession, in which you are right. You have confidence in yourself, which is valuable, if not an indispensable quality. You are ambitious, which, within reasonable bounds, does good rather than harm. But I think that during Gen. Burnside’s command of the Army you have taken counsel of your ambition, and thwarted him as much as you could, in which **you did a great wrong to the country**, and to a most meritorious and honorable brother officer. I have heard, in such way as to believe it, of your recently saying that both the Army and the Government needed a Dictator. Of course **it was not for this, but in spite of it, that I have given you command**. Only those generals who gain success can set up dictators. What I now ask of you is military success, and I will risk the dictatorship. The government will support you to the utmost of its ability, which is neither more nor less than it has done and will do for all commanders. I much fear that the spirit which you have aided to infuse into the Army, of criticizing their Commander, and withholding confidence from him, will now turn upon you. I shall assist you as far as I can, to put it down. Neither you, nor Napoleon, if he were alive again, could get any good out of an army, while such a spirit prevails in it. And now, **beware of rashness-beware of rashness**, but with energy, and sleepless vigilance, **go forward, and give us victories.**”³

In this correspondence, it would appear that the President is completely aware of Hooker’s potential shortcomings. Because of Lincoln’s frustrations with the failed opportunities of the Peninsula Campaign, the humiliation of Jackson’s handling of numerically superior Union forces in the Shenandoah Valley, the shocking reversal of Second Manassas and finally Burnside’s

² United States War Department. War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies. 128 parts in 70 vols. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), Series One, Vol. XXI, 998-999, Headquarters Army of the Potomac, General Orders No. 8, January 23, 1863. All citations from this work will be referred to hereafter as O.R. with appropriate volume, part, and page numbers.

³ O.R., Vol. XXV, part 2: 4. Emphasis added.

tragic efforts at Fredericksburg, he was willing to take a chance on "Fighting Joe Hooker." Lincoln believed that Hooker was the type of commander who would bring him the decisive victories he needed in the East in order to support his grand strategy, regardless of Hooker's personality or possible character flaws. Noah Brooks, a newspaperman, happened to be present at Hooker's headquarters when he received Lincoln's letter and remembered Hooker's reaction:

"He finished reading it almost with tears in his eyes; and as he folded it and put it back in the breast of his coat, he said, that is just such a letter as a father might write to a son. It is a beautiful letter, and although I think he was harder on me than I deserved, I will say that I love the man who wrote it."⁴

With his closing comments, "go forward and give us victories," Lincoln illustrated his intent for Hooker to assume the offensive as soon as possible. I believe the President had correctly identified the operational center of gravity as Lee's Army of Northern Virginia and he pressed Hooker to give him the victories he required in order to effectively pursue his national goal of reunification.

As Lee sat and watched the Union army from across the Rappahannock, he knew his options were limited. Having only commanded for twelve months, Lee had conducted four major campaigns and had been successful despite the high cost. He knew that he could not compete with the Union's ability to resupply and reconstitute its forces. He was also certain that the Union would attack again and Lee would have to win if he was to prolong the war. Although Lincoln's signing of the Emancipation Proclamation in January of 1863 served to strengthen the South's resolve against returning to the Union, Union advances in the West severely strained both the Confederacy's national will and its ability to support a war waged on two fronts. Like the North, the Confederacy also treated the Western Front as a secondary effort

⁴ Edward J. Stackpole, Chancellorsville: Lee's Greatest Battle, 2d ed. (Harrisburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1958), 7-8.

relative to the East, as the victories were not as dramatic and had not enjoyed the same praise as those closer to the Confederate capital. Additionally, Lee found his ability to supply his army in the field drastically hampered by the South's inability to shift from an agricultural to an industrial system along with the effective Union naval blockade on the East Coast, which was taking its toll on Confederate maritime trade.

Preparation Phase

Despite the Lincoln Administration's pressure for immediate action against Lee's forces, Hooker accurately recognized that drastic reform was clearly necessary after the Battle of Fredericksburg. His first priority was to reorganize the disheartened Army of the Potomac before undertaking a major operation. Hooker proceeded to implement many important organizational reforms from the command and staff level to the individual soldier.

Among these reforms was the elimination of the Grand Division structure of command implemented by Ambrose Burnside. Hooker had perceived the Grand Division system as an unnecessary and ineffective link in the chain of command during the fighting at Fredericksburg. Hooker replaced many of the poor commanders previously in positions of power with competent commanders such as Darius N. Couch, John F. Reynolds, and George G. Meade. More than previous Union commanders, Hooker also realized the importance of a strong cavalry and wanted to train his horsemen to equal those of Lee's celebrated "Jeb" Stuart. Hooker reorganized the Federal cavalry into a single cohesive 12,000 man corps and placed Major General George Stoneman at its head.⁵ With these fundamental changes, Hooker had basically

⁵ O.R., Vol. XXV, part 2: 51, Headquarters Army of the Potomac, General Orders No. 6, February 5, 1863.

restored the army to its former command structure, which allowed him to deal directly with his seven infantry corps commanders and now a single cavalry corps.

Additionally, he established an innovative intelligence system for his army under Colonel George H. Sharpe and had Sharpe report directly to him. Hooker also instituted and granted liberal furloughs, which significantly reduced the number of men absent without leave, which had risen to approximately 85,000 in February, over half the army's strength.⁶ Concurrently, throughout the ranks, Hooker required troops to drill and receive other military instruction while he improved their rations, medical care, and general living conditions.

Finally, Hooker created an Inspector General's Department with inspectors for the infantry, cavalry, and artillery branches of the army. Under the Chief Inspector of the Army, who reported directly to Hooker, this system took away some of the traditional responsibility of commanders, but it provided a responsive means for Hooker to ensure compliance with his initiatives. All of these reforms led to a great improvement in the morale and efficiency of the army and rebuilt the health and fighting spirit of its units.

During the first week of April, President Lincoln, accompanied by his family, politicians, and newspaper correspondents, came to the army's winter encampment near Fredericksburg and reviewed the entire Army of the Potomac before beginning the spring campaign. The effect was

⁶ O.R., Vol. XXV, part 2: 57, Headquarters Army of the Potomac, General Orders No. 10, February 7, 1863.

revitalizing, and the army was ready and eager to take the field. Brig. General Alpheus S. Williams, serving as a division commander in the XII Corps at the time, recounted, “I doubt if any week in the history of our country has ever witnessed such a large display of fine troops. The army never looked better.”⁷ It was reassuring to Lincoln to see the state of the troops, but he still had his inner uncertainty about Hooker himself.⁸

By the end of April, Hooker felt his men were ready to commence a new offensive against Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia. Hooker’s confidence was well grounded given Lee’s circumstances on the southern bank of the Rappahannock. Lee’s army had suffered terribly during the winter of 1862-63. Shortages of food, clothing, ammunition and forage for animals had reduced his army’s fighting edge.⁹ Additionally, Lee had dispatched Longstreet with two divisions to Suffolk to gather provisions and forage east of Richmond in hopes of getting his army some relief. Meanwhile on the other side of the Rappahannock, Hooker’s troops had regained the self-esteem they had lost at the disastrous Battle of Fredericksburg a few months earlier, and he had effectively reorganized and assembled the largest army fielded by the Union during the Civil War with a rebirth of purpose and capability.

Hooker’s Decision Making Process

The basic disposition of forces after Fredericksburg left the Army of the Potomac still occupying the Stafford Heights, looking down on the river and town with its main supply base at Aquia Creek Station approximately fifteen miles northeast of Fredericksburg. The aftermath of

⁷ Alpheus S. Williams, From The Cannon’s Mouth: The Civil War Letters of General A. S. Williams Ed. Milo M. Quaife. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1959), 176.

⁸ Stackpole, 3.

⁹ Sears, 118.

Fredericksburg played a major role in Hooker's planning for his spring offensive, as it had a significant impact on his basic concept for waging war. Fredericksburg had reinforced to Hooker that an attacking force was at a distinct disadvantage to a defending force. Hooker had experienced time and again the favorable dynamics that new battlefield tactics had provided to an entrenched defender. The impact of the rifled musket, with its increased range, gave a defender the capacity to shoot down more infantry and mounted attackers than was previously possible with the old smoothbore musket, resulting in a marked advantage to a force on the defensive.

Without question, Hooker's previous experiences in battle with General Lee also played a key role in his assessment of the current enemy situation and played a significant role in the development of Hooker's campaign plan. The key element of the Army of Northern Virginia was General Lee. Hooker did not have fond memories of his previous encounters with Lee's forces, recalling numerous times when he had seen Lee successfully fight a stronger Union force to a defeat or a standoff. Lee had forced out McClellan's army in Williamsburg on the Peninsula, which removed the threat to Richmond, defeated Pope's Army at Second Manassas, achieved success in a stalemate battle at Antietam, and decisively repulsed Burnside at Fredericksburg. Hooker had seen firsthand the results of Lee's actions on the battlefield. Despite much of Hooker's boasting and overconfidence in regard to Lee and the Army of Northern Virginia, I believe their previous encounters had left Hooker very cautious of Lee's abilities in addition to giving him a deeply rooted sense of professional respect, which played a significant role in Hooker's planning and decision-making processes.

In early April 1863, Hooker began planning his move against Lee and his forces, minus John Hood's and George Pickett's divisions who were away laying siege to Suffolk with General James Longstreet. His initial instructions from General-in-Chief, Henry W. Halleck, in late January 1863, suggested that Hooker's objective was not Richmond but the defeat and scattering of Lee's army. Halleck went on to recommend that Hooker look at turning or threatening the enemy at Fredericksburg in order to keep them occupied until a favorable opportunity presented itself. Halleck strongly implied the sense of urgency with which the Lincoln Administration desired Hooker to take the offensive against Lee as soon as possible. Hooker was also directed to keep in mind the importance of covering Washington and Harpers Ferry, because the current troops at those locations could not take a heavy attack.¹⁰

Prior to Lincoln departing Hooker's Falmouth headquarters in early April, the President reiterated what he saw as Hooker's objective during their final discussions of the strategic situation and future plans for the army. Hooker had put forth the idea of moving on Richmond and Lincoln advised him that his objective was Lee's army and not Richmond. Additionally, with Hooker's second-in-command, Major General Darius Couch of the II Corps, present Lincoln said, "I want to impress upon you two gentlemen, in your next fight put in all of your men."¹¹ Lincoln, however, also cautioned Hooker saying "that the political condition of the country and the shock of the unnecessary loss of life at Fredericksburg by Burnside was such that probably another army could not be raised, and that therefore he must be careful to avoid any great risk."¹² Although the President wanted action and victory, he had now firmly warned

¹⁰ Jack L. Ballard, General Joseph Hooker: A New Biography, Dissertation (Kent State University, December 1994), 995.

¹¹ Sears, 116.

¹² Ballard, 1019.

Hooker on two separate occasions not to destroy the Army of the Potomac, as evidenced by his initial correspondence to Hooker; “**beware of rashness,**” and now his counsel “**to avoid any great risk.**”

Hooker had no intentions of advancing through the city of Fredericksburg and repeating Burnside’s December disaster, but he still had to get across the Rappahannock. Similar to Burnside, Hooker wanted to cross the Rappahannock below Fredericksburg to the southeast, but realized this would uncover a direct route to Washington, which would displease Lincoln. He also recognized that any attempt to cross south of the town would immediately place his army in a compromising position given the enemy’s current disposition. With these parameters in mind, Hooker embarked on his mission to keep Lee’s army from threatening Northern territory and to destroy it as soon as possible. In order to accomplish this mission, he decided that an approach from the southeast would not be feasible. He had to find another way to effect a crossing of the Rappahannock in order to defeat Lee. Hooker looked to the northwest of Fredericksburg to cross the Rappahannock where there were three shallow fords: Bank's Ford, five miles above Fredericksburg; United States Ford, seven miles farther west; and Kelly's Ford beyond that.

In planning his campaign, Hooker’s estimate of those forces that would actually be available and effective for his spring offensive was much more limited than most accounts reveal. There were a number of personnel limitations that the Army of the Potomac faced.¹³ As of late April, the Army of the Potomac would count over 130, 000 men present for duty; however, in developing his plan, Hooker had just over 60,000 veterans in whom he could place

¹³ Sears, 132-133,

trust in combat. By the end of April, General Lee would face Hooker with approximately 65,000 men of all arms,¹⁴ which placed the two opposing commanders on approximately equal ground relative to basic line infantry.

A number of factors contributed to these planning figures. First, of the 130,000 men present for duty in the spring, over forty regiments approached the expiration of their terms of service, which would account for approximately 22,000 men. Hooker questioned whether these men would fight with their term nearing an end. Also, some 12,000 of the 130,000 men were cavalrymen, which Hooker planned to assign to independent missions away from the main line. Finally, Hooker also had to account and plan for a number of soldiers to be assigned to varying duties away from the line, including supply, guard, and administrative details. McClellan claimed that at one point in the Peninsula Campaign as much as one-fifth of the army's listed manpower was actually away from the line. If Hooker went into battle with 118,000 infantry listed on paper, he probably went in to the campaign with 88,000 men on the line, assuming that McClellan's estimates of deductions were accurate. Given Hooker's doubts about those 22,000 men nearing the end of their terms of service from the 88,000 men available on the line, he most likely planned with confidence for the employment of approximately 60,000 veterans which only represented a small advantage, as opposed to the normally accepted high advantage.¹⁵ Of note, Hooker's doubts were in fact confirmed, as Union commanders were faced with mutiny among six companies of one regiment that was engaged with Confederate forces on the eve of battle at Chancellorsville.¹⁶

¹⁴ Sears, 112.

¹⁵ Ballard, 1018.

¹⁶ O.R., Vol. XXV, part 2: 302.

Hooker was expected to assume the offensive, and he would be the attacker in a war that favored the defending side. To break this advantage, Hooker pursued the concept of operational maneuver to give him an advantage in order to avoid suicidal head-on assaults against Lee's troops occupying fortified positions. His approach in developing his plan sought to satisfy his superiors while reducing the high cost paid in Union lives that had been the price of victory in past battles. As Hooker set out to devise his plan, he was challenged with balancing a number of critical factors. Such factors included the caliber and capabilities of the enemy commander that opposed him, the relative combat power of forces, the President's instructions to strike the enemy but "beware rashness," the strength of position that the enemy possessed, and the natural and manmade obstacles which permeated his entire area of operations.

With all of these factors in mind, Hooker's approach for planning his spring offensive would focus the Army of Potomac's efforts toward outmaneuvering Lee's Army of Northern Virginia. Hooker's plan would also require his army to become much more mobile in order to attempt the turning movement he had planned against Lee's flank. In the unlikely case that his maneuvers did not cause Lee to withdraw as expected, Hooker did consider one additional possibility. That possibility would be to select an advantageous position and assume the defensive. His view of the active defensive called for getting the enemy to attack under adverse circumstances in order to follow-up with an effective counterattack.

Development of the Campaign Plan

Throughout his preparations for the spring campaign, General Hooker painstakingly adhered to the principle of maintaining the element of surprise. On April 11, Hooker sent a letter

to President Lincoln detailing his plans for the upcoming offensive. In order to prevent his plan from becoming compromised, he required his Chief of Staff, Major General Daniel Butterfield, to hand carry the letter to Lincoln himself. Pertinent extracts from the letter follow:

“After giving the subject my best reflection, I have concluded that I will have more chance of inflicting a heavier blow upon the enemy by turning his position to my right, and, if practicable, to sever his communications with Richmond with my dragoon force... I am apprehensive that **he will retire** from before me the moment I should succeed in crossing the river, and over the shortest line to Richmond, and thus escape being seriously crippled. I hope that when the cavalry have established themselves on the line between him and Richmond, they will be able to hold him and **check his retreat until I can fall on his rear...** While the cavalry are moving, I shall threaten the passage of the river at various points, and, after they have passed well to the enemy’s rear, shall endeavor to effect the crossing. I hope, Mr. President, that this plan will receive your approval...”¹⁷

Basically, Hooker planned a major turning movement to effect a double envelopment of Lee’s forces by moving from two directions while simultaneously disrupting and possibly cutting off his rear with Union horsemen (see Figure 1). In addition to the major river crossings and extended lines of movement required for this plan, Hooker hoped to achieve surprise by executing this scheme on terrain known as “the Wilderness,” which was generally considered difficult to impassable.

Hooker’s plan for success, however, was a plan of operational maneuver with the air of a general engagement, not a decisive battle. As evidenced by his letter to Lincoln, Hooker did not claim that his plan would defeat or destroy the Confederate forces but rather that he would have a chance to “inflict a heavy blow to the enemy.” Additionally, Hooker points out that he does

¹⁷ O.R., Vol. XXV, part 2: 199-200. Emphasis added.

not think that it is very likely that Lee will remain in place with Union forces pressing him from three directions. Without question, Hooker's words to the President indicate the single most significant flaw in his campaign plan. He assumed that Lee would retreat and that Hooker would be able to engage his rear as he withdrew. If Lee did not withdraw toward Richmond or Gordonsville when his supply line became threatened by Stoneman's encircling maneuver, then Hooker assumed Lee would surely retreat when he became outflanked by the Federal infantry on his left while simultaneously threatened to his front across the Rappahannock at Fredericksburg. I believe Hooker made this assumption because he knew exactly what action he would take if he were placed in Lee's situation: he would retreat. Moreover, I believe this assumption is consistent with Hooker's overarching plan for the defeat Lee's Army of Northern Virginia upon Hooker's pursuit of Lee to Richmond.

Hooker entered what he considered the initial stage of his spring offensive at Chancellorsville believing that he would first defeat Lee's army by maneuver. According to their earlier discussions and correspondence, Lincoln's concept of the campaign was devised with the destruction or scattering of Lee's army as the means of their defeat. Hooker, however, viewed the withdrawal of the enemy as a means to that end. It would also provide a moral victory for the army while avoiding costly head-on assaults. Prior to Chancellorsville, Hooker was already making preparations for driving to Richmond. He had made arrangements for the Union Navy to transport a million and a half rations up the Pamunkey River to supply his army on its final approach to the Confederate capital.¹⁸ Additionally, he had his artillerymen planning for a siege train of heavy guns to blast at the works surrounding Richmond.¹⁹ Furthermore, he

¹⁸ Sears, 120.

¹⁹ Ballard, 1013.

had coordinated with the Chief of Construction and Transportation of the U.S. Military Railroad Department, General Herman Haupt, to be prepared to establish the necessary communication lines.²⁰ Hooker did pursue Lee's army and not Richmond as the main objective as the President had directed, but the means that Hooker pursued to that end were misleading. According to his Chief of Staff, "General Hooker's belief, as he had always expressed it to me, was the rebellion rested upon that [Lee's] army, and when it was destroyed the end was at hand."²¹ However, I believe Hooker's overall plan for accomplishing Lincoln's stated intent was not limited to the actions Hooker had outlined in his letter to the President on April 11. Hooker's letter simply outlines the first step of his overall plan, which would seek to actually "defeat" Lee in or around Richmond.²²

Despite Lincoln's reminder to Hooker, "in the next fight put in all your men," I believe Hooker also had to consider Lincoln's warning to "beware rashness" and not to destroy the army. Therefore, he approached the actions planned for in and around Chancellorsville as but an intermediate step in his overall spring offensive in order to defeat the Army of Northern Virginia. Additionally, given the number of documented occasions throughout Hooker's career when he had questioned, disparaged, and disregarded superiors, the degree of independent thinking with which Hooker designed his overall concept comes as no surprise, as he weighs Lincoln's instructions against his own thoughts of how best to wage war. What a *grand victory* it would be for Hooker to defeat the "infamous" General Robert E. Lee at the steps of Richmond!

²⁰ Ballard, 972

²¹ Report of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War, (Washington, D.C.: U.S Government Printing Office), 80, Testimony of D. Butterfield, March 28, 1865.

²² Sears, 119.

The first step, as reflected in his letter to Lincoln on April 11, was to maneuver Lee out of Fredericksburg and then fall on his rear as he withdrew. This would position Hooker to continue the attack on Lee's forces on open ground, not yet specifically determined, where Lee would not have the time or opportunity to prepare adequate positions to repel Hooker's assault. Hooker's plan, as conceived in his own mind, could have satisfied both the President's goal and his own concept of how best to employ the Army of the Potomac in waging war. I believe Hooker selected his words very carefully in outlining his plan to the President. In Lincoln's response to Hooker's plan, Hooker attained the critical element of the President's firsthand approval when Lincoln wrote, "your letter, by the hand of General Butterfield, is received, and will be conformed to."²³ Hooker had the support he required, while reducing the likelihood of potential criticisms following Chancellorsville if questioned as to why Lee was not in fact "defeated." Assuming Lee would retreat, as he predicted, Hooker imagined he could then expect full support from the administration, as the army's "new shining star" and first successful commander of the Union to pursue the Confederates to Richmond.

Hooker's Concept of Operations

The first element of Hooker's concept of operations for the initial stages of his spring offensive involved the newly formed Cavalry Corps under Maj. Gen. George Stoneman. His 12,000-man cavalry force, less one brigade commanded by Brig. Gen. Alfred Pleasonton, was to encircle the Confederates at Fredericksburg in order to disrupt and cut off their lines of communication to the south.²⁴ The two remaining elements in Hooker's plan were then to close on Lee's forces from two directions. This double envelopment required Hooker to essentially

²³ O.R., Vol. XXV, part 2: 200.

²⁴ O.R., Vol. XXV, part 2: 204-205, 209.

split his infantry forces in half. Maj. Gen. George G. Meade's V Corps, Maj. Gen. O.O. Howard's XI Corps, and Maj. Gen. Henry W. Slocum's XII Corps, would initially make up Hooker's right wing.²⁵ This wing was to conduct a turning movement by marching approximately 40 miles around Lee's flank. Hooker's scheme called for this wing to cross the Rappahannock at Kelly's Ford, miles above Lee's left flank, which was anchored at Bank's Ford, in order to conceal the Federal movement to Lee's rear. The right wing would then turn southeastward and cross the Rapidan at the Germanna Ford and Ely's Ford toward the vital crossroads at Chancellorsville.

Hooker had created a major change in logistics to meet the needs of crossing the Rappahannock. He estimated that he needed to have his army independently supplied for a week to eight days in order to drive off Lee. To accomplish this and to give the army the capability to fight away from its base for seven to eight days, Hooker converted the army into a flying column. By providing his army with more than the traditional three days rations, he would be able to employ the type of operational maneuver required to turn Lee out of his position at Fredericksburg and pull the rebel army off the line of the Rappahannock. The reorganization exploited the limited means of transportation at this stage of the war to restore some semblance of strategic mobility to Civil War field operations.²⁶

Concurrent with the actions of Hooker's cavalry and his right wing, his plan called for the other major element of his divided infantry forces, the left wing, to feint just below the defenses

²⁵ O.R., Vol. XXV, part 2: 255, 262.

²⁶ O.R., Vol. XXV, part 2: 486.

at Fredericksburg at Franklin's Crossing and Pollock's Mill.²⁷ Hooker hoped the actions of the left wing would convince Lee that this was the main thrust of his attack, thereby pinning down a large portion of Lee's army to its static defensive positions at Fredericksburg or causing him to withdraw given the threat to his rear by Hooker's right wing. The planned composition of the left wing included Maj. Gen. John Sedgwick's VI Corps, Maj. Gen. John Reynolds' I Corps, and Brig. Gen. John Gibbon's division, from Couch's II Corps. In addition to these units, Maj. Gen. Sickles' III Corps was also part of Hooker's initial left wing organization, as was Maj. Gen. Darius Couch's II Corps. Hooker had instructed Sickles, however, to have his III Corps ready to move from the Fredericksburg area upon further orders.²⁸ These instructions indicated that even in the early stages of the plan, Hooker was considering the employment of Sickles' Corps across the Rappahannock with the right wing.

As for Couch's II Corps, Hooker planned for him to move two of his divisions to Bank's Ford and United States Ford in order to position Couch's force for follow-up action while further deceiving Lee as to his true intentions. Couch's forces were to demonstrate at these fords, just above Fredericksburg, while the left wing was executing similar actions just below Fredericksburg; overall, these actions were to support Hooker's main effort, allowing the right wing to successfully complete its crossings of the Rappahannock and Rapidan during its turning movement. Once the right wing was safely across, it would be able to easily uncover the United States and Bank's Fords along the Rappahannock as the forces closed on Chancellorsville. With these fords open, Couch's force would then join Hooker's right wing, putting four Corps of

²⁷ O.R., Vol. XXV, part 2: 265.

²⁸ O.R., Vol. XXV, part 2: 263.

Hooker's army at the Confederate rear at Chancellorsville. At this point Hooker intended to assume personal command of the right wing in Chancellorsville.

What's the Plan?

Almost exclusively, Hooker developed the actual details of the plan himself. As a result of his own shortfalls as an army commander, the limitations of the staff techniques of the day, and the importance he placed on maintaining the element of surprise, Hooker kept his master plan to himself. As late as April 26, Maj. Gen. Meade had written privately, "Hooker seems very confident of success, but lets no one into his secrets. I heard him say that not a human being knew his plans either in the army or at Washington."²⁹

The commanding generals of an army corps or division directed their operations and fought their battles on a strictly personalized basis, more often than not through the medium of oral, and frequently incomplete, fragmentary, "off the cuff" orders. The general's word was law, and it depended on his personality whether or not he involved his staff in his plans or gave them any opportunity to assist him in perfecting them.³⁰ Hooker's reputation had been built upon his record as a division and a corps commander; he did not make the essential transition from the approach he had previously exercised in those command positions to the scope of commandership required for an entire army.

²⁹ Ballard, 1049.

³⁰ Stackpole, 34.

Hooker's overall campaign concept could have resulted in a series of successful actions; however, one of its major weaknesses was the degree to which he chose not to involve his staff and his subordinate commanders. Hooker went to such lengths in keeping his plans under wraps that not even members of his immediate staff, to say nothing of his corps commanders, were informed in advance beyond the point of receiving such fragments of the whole picture as would permit them to issue necessary march orders to their units. The instructions for their future movements and combat orders were to follow later at such time as Hooker chose to issue them.³¹ Hooker failed to recognize the command, control, and coordination required to successfully execute the type of operation he had designed. Because Hooker's plan called for multiple independent maneuver elements conducting operations over extended lines of communications, it necessitated that he maximize the involvement of his staff and subordinates, rather than minimize it, as he chose to do.

The lack of information provided in regard to his plan is evidenced by Hooker's communication to Maj. Gen John Peck, Union commander at Suffolk, on the day prior to commencing operations, in which he writes:

"I have communicated to no one what my intentions are. If you were here, I could properly and willingly impart them to you. So much is found out the enemy in my front with regard to movements, that **I have concealed my designs from my own staff.**"³²

Additionally, given the limitations of the methods of communication utilized at the time and Hooker's inability to direct changes once his forces were dispersed and engaged, he would have to rely on the abilities of his subordinate commanders to take appropriate action on their own initiative. Hooker kept his plans so secret, however, that even his chief signal officer was not

³¹ Stackpole, 21.

³² O.R., Vol. XXV, part 2: 256-257. Emphasis added.

told what would be expected of him and could therefore take no precautions to spot the necessary material to keep his wire communications open in case of damage from artillery fire.³³

Adding to the shortfalls inherent in the basic commandership style adopted by Hooker, were his incessant efforts to prevent his plans from falling into the hands of the Confederates. The security of the Union plans was a top priority in preparation for the Chancellorsville campaign because Hooker's plan required the essential element of surprise. He went to great lengths to restrict the leakage of military information by taking special pains to prevent communication across the river, whether by private citizens or bored pickets, and to restrict access to visitors. He wrote, "When this army moves the sudden stoppage of all visitors to this camp would be a preliminary notice thereof."³⁴ Hooker even went so far as to ask the Postmaster in Washington to stop the mail. His request read, "Major-General Hooker, commanding this army, would like to have the entire mails of to-day from his army detained twenty-four hours in your office, if you do so with propriety. He has very urgent reasons for making this request, as you may readily imagine."³⁵ These were obviously prudent measures. However, frequent breaches in security continued to damage Hooker's command style by limiting the involvement of his staff and commanders even further.

In preparation for the campaign, Hooker conveyed his plans to virtually no one until the last moment; neither his primary staff nor his subordinate commanders were fully aware of the plan. Brig. Gen. Gouverneur Warren, Chief of Engineers, Army of the Potomac, remembered

³³ Stackpole, 162.

³⁴ O.R., Vol. XXV, part 2: 153-154.

³⁵ O.R., Vol. XXV, part 2: 209.

that “General Hooker never told much to his staff about what he was doing or going to do... He talked a great deal about what was going to be done. But what he was going to do he kept to himself.”³⁶ One of Hooker’s division commanders, Brig. Gen. Alpheus Williams, serving in the XII Corps stated, “We shall move, I think, in a few days, as preparations have been ordered which indicate that we are to march; I have no idea in what direction.”³⁷

Since his staff and commanders were not allowed to fully understand his plan and its overall intent, they did not have the requisite information to make decisions and take action without the centralized direction of Hooker himself. Later accounts by the *New York Times* on May 1, 1863, had the following comments in regard to the events at Chancellorsville:

“We have read a letter from the army written in the early part of this week by one who would be likely to know, which said that **everybody was in the dark**, and that at least three of the Major-Generals were then totally ignorant of the plan of action!”³⁸

In the design of his plan, Hooker failed to recognize that the centralized, personal leadership style that he intended to employ would likely be the exception and not the norm for exercising effective command during critical periods of the campaign. This flaw would result in numerous disconnects in Hooker’s plan. From its inception, the possibility of a coordinated, synchronized effort by his subordinates was destined to remain at odds with achieving Hooker’s intent throughout the execution of the Army of Potomac’s efforts at Chancellorsville.

³⁶ Joint Committee, Testimony of G. K. Warren, 50, March 9, 1864.

³⁷ Williams, 177.

³⁸ Ballard, 1095. Emphasis added.

ANALYSIS OF HOOKER'S INTENT DURING EXECUTION

Having identified a number of key factors that combined to form a significant influence on shaping Hooker's development of the campaign, I will next examine the actual conduct of the campaign in order to further illustrate Hooker's true design and intent for the initial stages of the campaign. When considering Hooker's subsequent actions during the campaign, a full understanding of his actual intent at Chancellorsville becomes self-evident in light of the previous influencing factors. Unlike the views expressed by Hooker's staff and subordinate commanders, the actions he undertook during the execution of the campaign will be viewed from a historical vantage point that grasps the full scope of Hooker's true intent. It was inconceivable that a military leader with Hooker's experience would simply fail to recognize the overwhelming necessity to modify his plan of action for his army at Chancellorsville. Instead of adapting to the changing situations that were presented to him on the battlefield, Hooker's actions will illustrate his insistence on maintaining the waning intent and design of his original plan with its primary intent to force Lee to withdraw.

Cavalry Action and Inaction

In accordance with Hooker's plan, Stoneman's cavalry actions were to precede the actions of the infantry formations of the left and right wings. On April 13, Stoneman's force departed for their designated fording sites over the Rappahannock with the mission of positioning themselves between Lee's army and Richmond in order to disrupt or cut off his lines of communications. Stoneman's route was to take him to the Aquia and Richmond lines.³⁹ He

³⁹ O.R., Vol. XXV, part 2: 209.

would then select strong positions and prepare to harass Lee's columns as they retired to the south. But as Stoneman was about to cross, bad weather and heavy rains prevented the crossing.⁴⁰ His advance party did, however, secure a ford site and manage to make it across to the south bank of the Rappahannock; but facing the possibility of being cut off, they re-forded the river in order to join the main force. The rains continued for almost two weeks. Hooker's cavalry remained basically stuck in the mud near Warrenton Junction behind the swollen waters of the Rappahannock for nearly two weeks. Delay after delay of Stoneman's cavalry caused considerable problems for Hooker's plan.

First and foremost, Hooker's planned cavalry actions were an essential element in creating a tactical dilemma for Lee's forces at Fredericksburg. He had planned for this force to operate independently in Lee's rear area for almost two weeks in order to bring about significant chaos. In Hooker's mind, these actions alone might be sufficient enough to cause Lee to evacuate his present defensive position and retreat to the south, with Hooker's infantry in a position to pursue.⁴¹

Also during Stoneman's delay, Hooker created an additional problem for himself by sending erroneous communications to the President. With Stoneman having been gone for two days before the rains came, Hooker, unaware of the cavalry's position, was sure he had already effected his crossing of the Rappahannock. To Hooker's misfortune, on April 15, he informed Lincoln that, "I am rejoiced that Stoneman had two good days to go up the river, and was

⁴⁰ O.R., Vol. XXV, part 2: 220-221.

⁴¹ Stackpole, 97.

enabled to cross it before it had become too much swollen.”⁴² Soon thereafter, Hooker learned of Stoneman’s actual disposition and had to recant his previous update to the President. Lincoln’s reply to Hooker stated:

“Gen. Stoneman is not moving rapidly enough to make the expedition come of anything. He has now been out three days, two of which were unusually fair weather, and all three without hindrance from the enemy, and yet he is not 25 miles from where he started. To reach his point he still has 60 to go, another river (the Rapidan) to cross, and will be hindered by the enemy. By arithmetic, how many days will it take him to do it? I do not know that any better can be done, but **I greatly fear it is another failure already.** Write me often. I am very anxious.”⁴³

As evidenced by Lincoln’s reply, Hooker would now be required to provide significant updates with detailed information above and beyond what was previously expected in keeping his superiors informed. To that end, the Secretary of War, Edwin M. Stanton, telegraphed Hooker on April 18 that Lincoln was departing from Washington on the morning of April 19 and would reach Aquia Creek at about 10:00 of that day.⁴⁴ Hooker met with Lincoln, Stanton, and Halleck, but what exactly transpired remained unknown and confidential. Without a doubt, Hooker felt the administration’s scrutiny of his actions intensify following the failure of his command’s first action.

A Change to the Plan, or Was It?

Lincoln certainly pressed Hooker for decisive action during their personal conference. Faced with mounting pressures from Lincoln, two weeks of bad weather that served to further delay the critical operations of his intended plan, and the ever-looming fact of his army’s expiring terms of enlistment, Hooker realized time was not in his favor. Still clinging to his

⁴² O.R., Vol. XXV, part 2: 213.

⁴³ O.R., Vol. XXV, part 2: 214. Emphasis added.

⁴⁴ O.R., Vol. XXV, part 2: 227.

original intent for the campaign, however, Hooker made only minor modifications to his plan. By April 21, Hooker signaled to the President that he felt he must modify his plans due to the weather. He writes, “I was attached to the movement as first projected, as it promised unusual success; but if it fails, I will project a movement which I trust will secure us success, but not to so great an extent, and one in the execution of which **I shall be able to exercise personal supervision.**”⁴⁵

Despite the contents of this dispatch, Hooker proceeded with his original plan basically unchanged. Simply as a result of timing, the cavalry force’s orders would in fact be modified, but only to the extent that they would not have the time to conduct the extensive two weeks of independent operations in advance of the infantry. The cavalry’s basic mission remained the same. On April 22, Hooker issued new orders to Stoneman. These instructions were very detailed in regard to the cavalry’s initial movements. Stoneman was instructed to cross the Rappahannock and the Rapidan as soon as possible. Hooker went on to suggest that Stoneman break up his command after crossing the Rapidan. These divided elements could then move along independent routes to inflict a vast deal of mischief, and at the same time bewilder the enemy as to the course and intentions of the main body.⁴⁶ These elements would then quickly link up at some point along his line of general operations. Unfortunately, Hooker did not specifically say that his previous instructions regarding Stoneman’s main effort, which was to interdict the Fredericksburg and Richmond Railroads, remained unchanged. Hooker would later describe Stoneman’s failure to adhere to the original orders by saying that, “Stoneman did not

⁴⁵ O.R., Vol. XXV, part 2: 236-237. Emphasis added.

⁴⁶ O.R., Vol. XXV, part 2: 244.

read his orders and determined to carry on operations in conformity with his own views and inclinations.”⁴⁷ In Stoneman’s defense, however, like the rest of the army, he was not aware of Hooker’s overall plan or intent.

In the proceeding days the result would be that Stoneman’s actions would not play a role in the events of the campaign. Stoneman’s cavalry did manage to cross the rivers, with the exception of Brig. Gen. William Averell’s division. Ironically, Hooker would later relieve Averell for his poor estimate of the situation and his inaction. With limited time and his forces dispersed, Stoneman proceeded to cause as much damage as possible with little to no interference from the Confederates. These operations were limited to less significant damage to the countryside and would have no affect on Lee’s position at Fredericksburg. One of the critical parts of Hooker’s plan was the assignment given to Stoneman and the cavalry. He was to cut Lee’s lines of communication but did not do so. Hooker maintained his hope that Lee’s lines would be cut by Stoneman, but every day during the campaign Hooker continued to see Confederate trains arriving on schedule, which showed that the lines were intact.⁴⁸ In fact, Hooker heard nothing from the cavalry until after the battle at Chancellorsville was over, despite his orders to Stoneman to communicate with him as often as necessary and practicable.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Joint Committee, Testimony of J. Hooker, 140, March 11, 1865.

⁴⁸ Sears, 440.

⁴⁹ Sears, 121.

In all of his plans, Hooker still maintained his intent of cutting Lee's supply lines and forcing him to retreat.⁵⁰ Not knowing the fate that would befall his cavalry force and recognizing the reduced timeframe available for their actions, Hooker's modified plan would not be based on high expectations for his cavalry; their efforts would now be viewed as secondary. With his right wing still crossing at the designated fords above Fredericksburg in order to turn to Lee's left and threaten his communications, the forces below Fredericksburg (the left wing) would continue as planned with a demonstration to threaten and fix Lee's army until Hooker could advance into the Confederate rear. Hooker's modified plan would place greater expectations on the dilemma created by his infantry's turning movement conducted in conjunction with the actions of the left wing. Hooker believed these actions would flank Lee out of his fortified lines, as Lee would be squeezed between two of his main elements. Hooker would later claim, "They may as well pack up their haversacks and make for Richmond... I shall be after them."⁵¹

Without the added pressure that Hooker had initially planned for with the cavalry in Lee's rear, and given Hooker's firm belief that the defensive position provided strength over that of the attacker, however, it was at this point that Hooker finally gave stronger consideration to one other possibility. In the event that Lee did move to oppose the Union's right wing in Chancellorsville, Hooker planned to assume a tactical defense. Hooker believed that if he assumed a strong defensive position near Chancellorsville with his left wing still in a position to threaten Lee's lines of movement to the south, then Lee would once again be compelled to

⁵⁰ Sears, 119, 129, 131.

⁵¹ Stackpole, 147.

retreat. Therefore, the primary intent of Hooker's somewhat modified plan remained to simply scatter Lee's army in a general engagement and not to force a decisive battle at Chancellorsville with the same result of forcing Lee to retreat.

These changes would remain basically opaque to Hooker's staff and subordinate commanders because at this time, and throughout the campaign, they would continue to remain unaware of what the overall plan was.⁵² Given the evolving situation that occurred at this early stage of Hooker's plan, his actions positively illustrate his resolve to adhere to his original intent. Hooker remained unshaken in his conviction that Lee would be forced to retreat. Even if Stoneman should fail again, with the reduced task Hooker had given him, Lee would still be up against a Union force occupying strong defensive positions along with Union forces maneuvering to his rear and flanks. No matter which direction Lee might choose to move, Hooker still believed he would be in a position to direct his forces after him from three directions. All of this was to occur with Lee's lines of communications in constant jeopardy of being cut off. Additionally, it is important to note that Hooker's comments further reinforced the type of commandership he intended to employ in executing his modified plan when, in his telegram to the President on April 21, he said of his plan, "... the execution of which I shall be able to exercise personal supervision."

To Steal a March on Lee

While the Federal cavalry was underway with misinterpreted and confusing orders, Hooker would set in motion the two infantry wings of his army with similar confusion. Orders

⁵² Sears, 128.

for the advance on Lee's forces came from Hooker's headquarters near Falmouth in rapid succession from April 26-29. These orders were written and dispatched separately for each of his major subordinate commanders (MSC). It appears that very few copies of these individual orders were dispatched to any of the adjacent commanders. Additionally, there are no indications that any meetings of the MSCs occurred in order to discuss the collective actions of the army. The initial orders to each MSC did not indicate what their objectives were or what the overall concept of the operation was to be. Rather, their orders simply indicated where each unit was to march and by what time their movements were to be accomplished. These orders were once again an indication of the centralized command that Hooker expected to exercise.

On April 27, Hooker's right wing, the IX, XII, and V Corps, moved to Kelly's Ford and began their movement over the Rappahannock on the evening of April 28 (see Figure 2). In accordance with his plan, the remainder of Hooker's army continued to make its final preparations for the movement of the right wing to Chancellorsville planned for April 29. After crossing at Ely and Germanna Fords, the three corps of the right wing converged on Chancellorsville with only limited engagements with Confederate forces. By the morning of April 30, the initial three corps of the right wing arrived in the vicinity of Chancellorsville. Concurrent with the right wing's movement on April 29-30, Sedgwick, who was placed in command of the left wing, demonstrated and crossed the Rappahannock at the planned fords below Fredericksburg meeting only token Confederate resistance. He maintained his advance elements across the river while the remainder of his VI Corps and Sickles' III Corps stood ready to cross from the east shore. Hooker's plan was on the right track. William Swinton, *New York Times*'s army correspondent, summarized the initial movements of Hooker's army:

“To have marched a column of fifty thousand men, laden with sixty pounds of baggage and encumbered with artillery and trains, thirty-seven miles in two days; to have bridged and crossed two streams, guarded by a vigilant enemy, with the loss of half a dozen men, one wagon, and two mules,-- is an achievement which has few parallels, and which well deserves to rank with Prince Eugene’s famous passage of the Adige.”⁵³

However exaggerated this praise, Hooker nevertheless deserved high marks on his management of the campaign thus far. Leaving Stoneman’s delay out of consideration, nothing had gone wrong or been mismanaged up to that moment. The key element of surprise had allowed Hooker to achieve initial success in these movements and thus “steal a march on Lee.” However, the manner in which Hooker pursued the preservation of his plan’s operational security, which provided him with the key element of surprise, came at a high price, a price that would soon cost him dearly.

With Hooker denying his MSCs access to critical pieces of information, they would not be able to take appropriate action in the future, and Hooker would not be in a position to exercise personal control over the entire battlefield. This would quickly lead not only to a disastrous breakdown in Hooker’s plan, but also to the exposure of his inability to effectively adapt to the fluidity of the changing tactical situations that evolved.

What’s Lee Doing?

Initially Lee thought the diversion by the Union left wing below Fredericksburg would be Hooker’s main effort. By April 29 Lee correctly estimated what Hooker’s intentions were, and he reported to the Confederate President, Jefferson Davis, “Besides the force which was reported by General Stuart to have crossed on the pontoons bridges laid below Kelly’s Ford, I have

⁵³ Theodore A. Dodge, The Campaign of Chancellorsville, 2d ed. (Boston: Ticknor & Fields, 1881), 37.

learned this evening by couriers from Germanna and Ely's Fords that the enemy's cavalry crossed the Rapidan... infantry was said to have crossed with the cavalry... **Their intention, I presume, is to turn our left, and probably to get into our rear.**⁵⁴ Lee does not hesitate to take measures to meet what he believed to be an upcoming attack by the Union. His reaction to Hooker was later filed in his official report, which stated that:

“On the night of April 29, General Anderson was directed to proceed toward Chancellorsville... The enemy in our front near Fredericksburg continued inactive, and it was now apparent that the main attack would be made upon our flank and rear. It was, therefore, determined to leave sufficient troops to hold our lines, and with the main body of the army to give battle to the approaching column.”⁵⁵

Hooker's secrecy had paid off in that he had initially surprised Lee. Hooker's earlier feints and Sedgwick's present demonstration at Fredericksburg, however, had not persuaded Lee to jump to premature conclusions. Also to Hooker's advantage, it should be noted that Lee did express concern in his message to President Davis by stating that the scattered condition of his force favored Hooker's intended operations and he hoped Davis would send reinforcements immediately. Also, Lee indicated that Hooker's position did have Lee considering the likelihood of a possible retreat to Richmond. Due to the nature of the situation, Longstreet was also notified through Lee's signal and informed on April 29 that he was to rejoin Lee as soon as possible. However, Longstreet did not comply, as Lee notes on May 2 that he no longer expected that any reinforcements would join him in time to aid in the contest.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ O.R., Vol. XXV, part 2: 756. Emphasis added

⁵⁵ O.R., Vol. XXV, part 1: 796-797.

⁵⁶ O.R., Vol. XXV, part 2: 765.

Attack, Defend, or Wait?

Prior to Hooker's arrival at Chancellorsville, Slocum, as the senior corps commander had been designated by Hooker to take charge of the right wing's final movement and disposition at Chancellorsville. Hooker's follow-up orders to Slocum for the right wing were issued on April 28 and April 29. These instructions directed Slocum to uncover the United States Ford (expecting the enemy to simply abandon the ford once they saw Slocum's force), scout forward of Chancellorsville with attached cavalry to determine the enemy's strength, and to secure positions on the Plank Road and uncover Bank's Ford if his estimate of the enemy threat supported such an action. Hooker also expected full communications to be established with Slocum once the United States Ford had been uncovered.⁵⁷

In addition to the basic framework of these orders, Hooker also indicated some very telling thoughts as to his true intent for Slocum's action at Chancellorsville. Chancellorsville commanded a number of key roads running from Gordonsville to Fredericksburg, which Hooker assumed to be one of Lee's primary lines of retreat. Hooker's instructions of April 28 illustrated his intent to force Lee out of his positions and into retreat when he told Slocum that he desired him, "to advance **at all hazards**, securing a position on the Plank Road."⁵⁸ Hooker reiterates this point in a directed signal from Butterfield on April 29 when he relays to Slocum that he must, "move to command the Plank Road, which is **the line of the enemy's retreat.**"⁵⁹ These orders reinforce Hooker's belief that once he had reached Chancellorsville, his maneuvers and position would force Lee to retreat as he threatened to cut his supply lines from Gordonsville and the

⁵⁷ O.R., Vol. XXV, part 2: 273-274, 292-293.

⁵⁸ O.R., Vol. XXV, part 2: 274. Emphasis added.

⁵⁹ O.R., Vol. XXV, part 2: 293. Emphasis added.

Virginia Central Railroad. As Hooker assumed, Stoneman was supposed to be moving against the Richmond-Fredericksburg line in order to threaten Lee's lines to the south. Hooker thought that the combined effects of his right wing's action to Lee's west and the cavalry's action to his south would result in his objective of forcing Lee to retreat once he had cut both of the primary lines of supply to his army.

On April 29, Hooker further illustrated that the right wing's movement to Chancellorsville was intended to facilitate only limited offensive actions in order to attain positions for a strong show of force rather than for launching into an all-out attack. Hooker's follow-up orders implied defensive operations when he directed that Slocum, "move as high up as Chancellorsville; **establish your right** strongly on the Plank Road; look out for your left too. The map indicates that from Chancellorsville to the Rappahannock is **a very strong position**."⁶⁰ In the event Lee did not retreat and moved in force in the vicinity of Slocum's line of advance at Chancellorsville, Hooker's orders were for him to, "**select a strong position**, and compel him [Lee] to attack you on your ground... not a moment be lost until our troops are established at or near Chancellorsville. **From that moment all will be ours.**"⁶¹ Additionally, Slocum was informed that as soon as he uncovered the United States Ford, he would be reinforced by Couch's two divisions, and then probably by Sickles' entire command.⁶²

Despite the indirect nature of these orders, they illustrated for the first time to Hooker's subordinate commanders his true rationale and intent for Chancellorsville. Two significant

⁶⁰ O.R., Vol. XXV, part 2: 292-293. Emphasis added.

⁶¹ O.R., Vol. XXV, part 2: 274. Emphasis added.

⁶² O.R., Vol. XXV, part 2: 304-305, 314.

indications of Hooker's intent were provided by these orders. The first illustrated Hooker's intent to force Lee to retreat. The second illustrated Hooker's consideration of assuming a tactical defensive posture while remaining on the operational offensive. Both of these aspects of Hooker's orders were consistent with his original intent, as he believed these actions would force Lee to retreat.

On April 30, Hooker's right wing began to arrive at Chancellorsville. His advance elements drove Anderson's Confederates back from Chancellorsville to an imaginary line between the Tabernacle Church and the Turnpike and Plank Roads. As the three corps of the right wing under Slocum were closing in on their initial objectives at Chancellorsville, he and Meade received a confusing set of orders from Hooker, which directed, "**No advance beyond Chancellorsville till columns are concentrated**"⁶³ Within the framework of Hooker's previous orders, these instructions seemed to contradict his instructions of April 28 and 29 by telling them to basically stop and wait, regardless of the enemy situation, until all elements including the reinforcing corps of Sickles and Couch had completed their movement to Chancellorsville. Again, the actions Hooker took in issuing the order to halt and concentrate reflected his true intent to simply force Lee to retreat.⁶⁴ This action followed his original plan. Hooker remained firm in his belief that massing such an overwhelming force in a position of advantage over Lee would surely force his opponent to see the light and retreat back toward Richmond.

⁶³ O.R., Vol. XXV, part 2: 304. Emphasis added.

⁶⁴ Stackpole, 146.

Of course, without Hooker communicating the actual intent of these orders, Slocum and Meade could not understand why they appeared to be going on the defense after undertaking such an offensive maneuver, since the enemy situation to their front did not require such a delay. The area that Slocum failed to advance against consisted of high, open ground beyond the Wilderness, which dominated the area running toward Fredericksburg. This was the key position that Hooker needed in order to transition to a strong defense. Slocum might have pressed Hooker's instructions if he had known what Hooker's intent actually was, but without the necessary information to take the initiative, Slocum complied with Hooker's orders and gave up the key ground without a fight. Hooker had intended to be present himself to make such decisions; however, he was delayed in reaching Chancellorsville because of a problem establishing communications with the army's left wing. The telegraph line connecting Hooker and his headquarters back at Fredericksburg was down and Hooker was apprehensive about leaving for Chancellorsville.⁶⁵

With Hooker's infantry forces spread over about a forty-mile front, his attempts to coordinate its actions would be difficult at best. Without the use of sufficient cavalry forces to conduct local screen and reconnaissance missions, Hooker relied heavily on his signal capability to coordinate the efforts of his army. Had Hooker been at Chancellorsville on April 30, as intended, his right wing's advance might not have been delayed. Again, Hooker's actions are reflective of the shortfalls that resulted from his secrecy in communicating his plan and the personal leadership style he hoped to exercise over the entire army. Of note, in Hooker's attempt

⁶⁵ Ballard, 1066.

to oversee every aspect of the plan, he traveled over 100 miles on horseback between April 28 and May 1.⁶⁶

Without question, Slocum and Meade were correct in their estimate of the situation; as one officer commented, “one more immediate and vigorous push, and the Army of Northern Virginia would have been desperately compromised, practically defeated.”⁶⁷ The next 20 hours of delay would allow Lee the opportunity to pin Hooker’s right wing against the dense woods of the Wilderness in the days to follow. However, the point is that Hooker’s action was not due to a “lack of nerve” but rather his adherence to the set plan and intent he had designed from the outset of the campaign.

“Our Enemy Must Ingloriously Fly”

Hooker arrived at Chancellorsville on the evening of April 30 and issued a congratulatory order to the officers of the right wing, saying, “operations of the last three days have determined that our enemy must ingloriously fly, or come out from behind his defenses, and give us battle on our own ground, where certain destruction awaits him.”⁶⁸ Despite the weakness of the position occupied by Hooker at Chancellorsville, he boasted amongst his men with great confidence, saying, “God have mercy on General Lee, for I shall have none.”⁶⁹ Recounting the events of that evening, Williams wrote:

“Chancellorsville house became the center of hundreds of officers (generals and staff). It was a gay and cheerful scene. We had successfully accomplished what we all supposed would be the great work of the campaign. Everybody prophesied a great success, an overwhelming victory. Gen. Hooker came over during the evening and issued a flaming

⁶⁶ Ballard, 1060.

⁶⁷ Dodge, 279.

⁶⁸ Dodge, 38.

⁶⁹ Stackpole, 147.

order complimenting the splendid operations of the 5th, 11th, and 12th corps. All was *couleur de rose!* How many joyous hearts and bright cheerful faces beat and smiled happily for the last time on that delightful moonlight night at Chancellorsville!”⁷⁰

Hooker would attempt to do at Chancellorsville what he had seen Lee do so often to the Union forces, that is, combine operational offense and tactical defense. He had observed previous Federal attacks against Lee's forces occupying positions where the defense possessed by the Confederates had a marked advantage over the offense. However, in Hooker's case, the position his forces occupied did not offer such an advantage. The terrain of the Wilderness gave Lee a close approach to Hooker's lines that would allow him to attack from close range virtually undetected, nullifying the advantage of the rifled musket's long range. Also, the Wilderness limited Hooker's own ability to transition to the offense because he was basically hemmed in by it. Hooker attempted to correct this disposition on May 1 by pushing his army out of the Wilderness and toward Fredericksburg in order to gain a more favorable position for his defense. The disposition he hoped to gain was basically the same as the one offered by the positions identified by Slocum and Meade upon their arrival at Chancellorsville the day prior. Hooker's orders for the May 1 advance, however, were once again vague with respect to his true intent for the army's actions.

Hooker's intent was not an attack but rather an attempt to transfer his line from Chancellorsville to one adjacent to Bank's Ford on better ground located just west of Fredericksburg. This maneuver was designed to strengthen his defensive position while sufficiently threatening Lee's lines, causing him to retreat to Richmond or attack the five corps

⁷⁰ Williams, 185.

massed at Chancellorsville. It would also give Stoneman's cavalry further opportunity to carry out their mission while concurrently opening up a line of communications with Hooker's left wing at Bank's Ford. Hooker explained to Butterfield in regard to the right wing's engagement on May 1 that he had not made an attack:

"You are mistaken in supposing I made an attack. The attack was ordered at 2p.m., and at 1:30 the troops were **moving into position**, and attacked while moving... I think the enemy in his desperation will be compelled to attack me on my own ground."⁷¹

Despite Hooker's intent, his order for May 1 was sent out at about 11:00 after some delay that morning due to conflicting reports of Confederate activity. Hooker's order assigned units to their basic line of advance with rough march objectives. His orders, however, did not indicate what the purpose of their movements was, nor did they indicate what follow-up action his subordinates could expect to perform upon reaching their march objectives.⁷² Lee, on the other hand, had wasted little time in responding to Hooker's maneuvers. He had ordered Anderson and McLaws to march toward Chancellorsville and to hold Hooker in place until General "Stonewall" Jackson could be brought up, which was accomplished due to Hooker's delayed action that morning. Major General Jubal Early's division was left in Fredericksburg as a pinning force on Sedgwick's left wing. Lee had taken his first risk by dividing his forces to fight in two directions (see Figure 3).

With two corps of Hooker's right wing sent down the Orange Plank and Turnpike Roads and another down the River Road, a meeting and engagement between Lee's and Hooker's

⁷¹ O.R., Vol. XXV, part 2: 330. Emphasis added.

⁷² O.R., Vol. XXV, part 2: 324.

forces soon ensued. Additionally, Hooker had sent orders for Sedgwick to make a demonstration, “severe as can be, but not an attack.”⁷³ However, Sedgwick did not receive this order until late in the day, after the engagement at Chancellorsville was over. Hooker had intended to confront Lee with the dilemma of being threatened from all sides. However, without Sedgwick’s demonstration of some 40,000 troops moving toward the Bowling Green Road, threatening the Confederate’s lines to the south, Lee had been free to decisively reinforce his position to the west by fully committing Jackson’s corps to oppose the piecemeal efforts of Hooker’s right wing on May 1.

Hooker’s right wing moved out soon after 11:00 and began skirmishes with the Confederate forces that opposed them. Due to the nature of the engagement, Hooker decided that their positions were no longer tenable and ordered them to fall back to their previously assigned positions at Chancellorsville.⁷⁴ He stated that:

“Commanders of the Second, Fifth, Eleventh, and Twelfth Corps will at once have their commands established on the lines assigned them last night... without a moment’s delay. The major-general commanding trusts that a suspension in the attack to-day will embolden the enemy to attack him.”⁷⁵

Unfortunately, Hooker had failed to communicate his intentions for the army’s movements of May 1, and confusion ran rampant among his subordinate commanders upon receipt of Hooker’s order to withdraw. The situation was further compounded by his subordinates’ lack of awareness as to the army’s overall situation.

⁷³ O.R., Vol. XXV, part 2: 338. The time was 11:30 on the order, but it was not received until 16:55.

⁷⁴ Sears, 210-211.

⁷⁵ O.R., Vol. XXV, part 2: 328.

Despite elements of the Union advance reaching key terrain, Hooker had estimated that his force could not bring sufficient forces forward to maintain their positions. He saw his three columns on three separate roads through the Wilderness, stretched out on narrow routes and only about half way to their objectives. Hooker estimated that the whole rebel army was on ground of its choice in a solid line, with artillery in place and Confederate columns poised to strike Slocum's right flank and interdict Meade's march up the River Road. Sykes and Slocum faced being overmatched by rebel forces to their front, while the remainder of Hooker's army was caught in the Wilderness. Hooker then ordered his forces to fall back in order to pursue a stronger position instead of continuing to funnel his command piecemeal into battle. Hooker simply did not think he could have thrown troops through fast enough to resist the advance of Lee, which he believed would result in his forces being whipped in battle.⁷⁶

There was considerable disagreement among Hooker's subordinates as to their ability to successfully maintain their advance. Couch wrote that on receipt of the order to fall back, he conferred with Hancock, Sykes, Warren and others who were present; all agreed that the ground should be held because of its commanding position and the open country to their front.⁷⁷ Couch also later recorded:

"Proceeding to the Chancellor House, I narrated my operations in front to Hooker, which were seemingly satisfactory, as he said: 'It is alright, Couch, I have gotten Lee just where I want him, he must fight me on my own ground.' The retrograde movement had prepared me for something of the kind, but to hear from his own lips that the advantages gained by the successful marches of his lieutenants were to culminate in fighting a defensive battle in that nest of thickets, was too much, and I retired from his presence with the belief that my commanding general was whipped man."⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Joint Committee, Testimony of J. Hooker, 125, March 11, 1865.

⁷⁷ Stackpole, 189.

⁷⁸ Stackpole, 190.

Hooker would later defend himself:

“This movement has since been severely criticized by persons fancying that they were judges... apparently having been misled by misapprehensions of the relative forces...” Such criticisms, he went on, “appear trifling to me, as their authors have never seen the ground and know nothing of my surroundings... If situated in like manner again, I do not hesitate to declare, as my conviction, I should repeat the order.”⁷⁹

Despite what appeared to all to be a vain effort, Hooker did not lose confidence in himself or in his plan.⁸⁰ He believed that his original plan was still on track. He had drawn Lee out from behind his fortified lines at Fredericksburg, and he felt he had his army in a good position south of the Rappahannock to fight an impending defensive battle while Lee’s lines faced sure pressure from his cavalry and the subsequent action he anticipated from his left wing. Hooker had relayed as much to Butterfield by stating that he:

“hoped the enemy will be emboldened to attack me. I did feel certain of success. If his [Lee] communications are cut, he must attack me. I have a strong position. All the enemy’s cavalry are on my flanks, which leads me to suppose that our dragoons [Stoneman’s cavalry] will meet with no obstacle in cutting their communications.”⁸¹

Hooker entered into the remaining days of battle still holding true to his original intent by pursuing the one possibility that he had conceived from the very beginning. He still believed that Sedgwick and his left wing would force Lee against Hooker’s main defensive position at Chancellorsville if his operational maneuvering should fail to drive the Confederate army to the south.⁸²

⁷⁹ Sears, 211-212.

⁸⁰ Sears, 224.

⁸¹ O.R., Vol. XXV, part 2: 328.

⁸² Stackpole, 148.

Lee's in Retreat... or Is He?

The final blow to Hooker's plan occurred when Lee's forces conducted a bold flanking attack on the afternoon of May 2, which basically turned Hooker's turning movement. The success of Lee's attack can be attributed to Hooker's fixation on his belief that Lee would retreat. On the morning of May 2, Lee marched some 26,000 of Jackson's Confederates across Hooker's front and around to his right flank (see Figure 4), then organized battle lines in the Wilderness and attacked Hooker's flank. This attack sent the entire Union position at Chancellorsville into chaos. Concurrently, Lee had divided his forces for the second time and held the remainder of Hooker's defensive formation in place with demonstrations while Early continued to hold Sedgwick at Fredericksburg. While observing Jackson's line of movement, the Union army made the fatal determination that Lee was retreating. This assessment proved to be catastrophic to Hooker's army, as the surpiser became the surprised.

While probing Hooker's lines, Jackson had found a road to Hooker's right flank. However, a portion of the road ran along uncovered high ground, which exposed Jackson's move. Additionally, Jackson's route of movement veered south before looping around the Union left. This doubtless convinced Hooker that the rebel army was in retreat.⁸³ As Williams recalled later:

“All night the noise of the enemy moving along our front was distinctly heard, and it was reported that his columns could be distinctly seen a short distance in advance. The rumor was that at Gen. Hooker's headquarters it was believed the enemy were retreating toward Orange Court House and quite a number of prisoners brought up the road was taken as evidence of the fact of haste and confusion amongst them.”⁸⁴

⁸³ Ballard, 1201.

⁸⁴ Williams, 188.

Hooker knew Jackson was moving across the Union's front. This discovery provided Hooker with another opportunity to regain the initiative by attacking either Jackson's moving flank or Lee's numerically inferior holding forces. Hooker refused to view the situation with any sense of objectivity, however, and continued to believe that his original plan would bring him victory. Even though Hooker received numerous reports of Jackson's move and the possibility of a flank attack, Hooker preferred to believe that Lee was fleeing.

In accordance with his plan, Hooker maintained his defensive position and ordered Sedgwick to attack Early's division at Fredericksburg and pursue what seemed to be a fleeing Lee. At 16:00 he sent the following to Sedgwick, "... capture Fredericksburg with everything in it, and vigorously pursue the enemy. **We know that the enemy is fleeing**, trying to save his trains. Two of Sickles' divisions are among them."⁸⁵ By all accounts, it would appear that Hooker believed he had driven off part of Lee's army and had the remainder pinned down to his front at Chancellorsville and that he had set in motion the defeat of Lee's remaining division, which was isolated at Fredericksburg.

There is speculation that Hooker did take precautions to protect his flank in orders sent to Howard. At about 09:30 on May 2, Hooker sent a message that, "the right of your line does not appear to be strong enough... we have good reason to suppose that the enemy is moving to our right."⁸⁶ However, the evidence is overwhelming that Hooker did not put any stock in these precautionary instructions, as his actions confirm his belief that Lee was in fact retreating.

⁸⁵ O.R., Vol. XXV, part 2: 363. Emphasis added. Sedgwick does not receive these instructions until after 17:00 and conducts limited night operations. Despite orders to continue to press the attack, he waits until morning, which causes significant problems for Hooker on May 3.

⁸⁶ O.R., Vol. XXV, part 2: 360-361.

Additionally, Hooker directed Sickles' III Corps to send units south to develop the situation in pursuit of the enemy force he was observing. Hooker also dispatched Howard's general infantry reserve (Barlow's division) to Sickles' Corps for the attack on the tail end of Lee's column. This further supports the idea that Hooker believed that Lee was in fact retreating, because he would not have detached Howard's reserve if he had truly thought a Confederate flanking attack was forthcoming. Even after Jackson's crushing blow to Hooker's right flank, however, he still appeared determined to force his plan, as evidenced by his follow-up orders at 21:00 that evening, in which he reiterates to Sedgwick:

"Cross the Rappahannock at Fredericksburg... at once take up his line of march on the Chancellorsville road... and you will attack and destroy any force you may fall in with... You will probably fall upon the rear of the forces commanded by General Lee, and **between us we will use him up.**"⁸⁷

On May 3, following Jackson's flank attack, Lee continued to press Hooker on all sides in an attempt to reunite his army and close in on Hooker's forces at Chancellorsville. After being forced from the key terrain of Hazel Grove, Hooker withdrew to yet another defensive position allowing Lee to reunite his forces in Chancellorsville. Hooker still maintained his efforts to force his original plan despite the deterioration of the situation over the previous two days. Hooker again ordered Sedgwick, who was still at Fredericksburg, to seize Fredericksburg and then attack down the Plank Road into Lee's rear.⁸⁸ Once again, Hooker thought the actions of his left wing pushing Lee against his strong defense at Chancellorsville would force Lee into thinking that his lines of communications would soon be lost and that he would therefore elect to retreat. The orders to Sedgwick again illustrate Hooker's rigid estimate of the situation and his inability to adapt his plan to the changing circumstances around him. Sedgwick did attack and

⁸⁷ O.R., Vol. XXV, part 2: 365-366. Emphasis added.

⁸⁸ O.R., Vol. XXV, part 2: 386, 387, 388.

forced Early off Maryes Heights and into flight south along Telegraph Road on May 3.⁸⁹ Having done that, Sedgwick proceeded cautiously up the Plank Road into Lee's rear. (See Figure 5).

Seeing that he was now threatened from a new direction, Lee divided his forces for a third time. Due to Jackson's unfortunate wound the previous evening, Stuart was left in charge of holding Hooker using Jackson's Corps at Chancellorsville, while Lee redirected units to stop Sedgwick. Hooker relays as much to President Lincoln at 15:30 on May 3, when he writes, "we have had a desperate fight yesterday and today... I do not despair of success. If Sedgwick could have gotten up, there could have been but one assault...we will endeavor to do our best. My troops are in good spirits."⁹⁰

Back Across the River

By the evening of May 4, Lee completely surrounded Sedgwick and forced him up against the southern bank of the Rappahannock (see Figure 6). Hooker had not advanced out of his defensive position and therefore had created no dilemma for Lee to react to. Instead, Lee was again free to maneuver his divided army in force to critical locations on the battlefield and defeat elements of Hooker's army piecemeal.⁹¹ Despite orders to stay and fight, Sedgwick was forced to withdraw across the river.⁹²

⁸⁹ O.R., Vol. XXV, part 2: 390, 391.

⁹⁰ O.R., Vol. XXV, part 2: 379. Hooker is placing fault at Sedgwick's feet for not continuing the advance he ordered on May 2 and for having still not completed the actions ordered by the afternoon of May 3.

⁹¹ O.R., Vol. XXV, part 2: 402, 407. Sedgwick reports to Hooker that his advance had been checked on May 3. May 4 he reports that the enemy is pressing him and he is preparing to cross the river.

⁹² O.R., Vol. XXV, part 2: 408, 419. Hooker orders Sedgwick to remain on the south side of the Rappahannock.

On that same evening, Hooker assembled his corps commanders and explained that his instructions compelled him to cover Washington and not to jeopardize the army. Meade, Reynolds, and Howard urged Hooker to continue the fight while Sickles and Couch agreed with Hooker that they should suspend the Union efforts. Sickles had influenced Hooker's decision by reminding him that the success of the army was secondary to the avoidance of disaster and that it would have a grave impact, strategically speaking, for the North to suffer a significant defeat at this time. He went on to advise Hooker that it would be better to re-cross the river and recuperate and attempt another campaign, than to run the risk of defeat.⁹³ As Hooker considered Sickles' words of advice, he was certainly reminded of President Lincoln's similar words of caution.

The following day, Hooker ordered the withdrawal of the remainder of his army across the river and back to Falmouth.⁹⁴ By May 6, both armies were back in their pre-battle positions. The Union had nothing to show for its efforts and the Confederacy would live to fight another day. (See Figure 7). As one of Hooker's generals reported home with news of the army's campaign:

"You will be startled to see that I am back to the old camping ground. But so it is, and sadly so. After ten days of great hardship, exposure, and privations we are back again with a diminished and dispirited army. I am by no means cheerful, because I think this last [battle] has been the greatest of all bunglings in this war. I despair of ever accomplishing anything so long as generals are made as they have been."⁹⁵

⁹³ Dodge, 227.

⁹⁴ O.R., Vol. XXV, part 2: 420, 421-422, 428.

⁹⁵ Williams, 177-178. May 7, 1863.

CONCLUSION

Hooker's concept of the campaign was devised with the intent to force the withdrawal of Lee's army in order to lead to its eventual defeat. His plan was not actually to destroy Lee at Chancellorsville, as most would speculate. Lincoln had in fact told Hooker, "in the next fight put in all your men," but he also gave him a warning of caution not to destroy the army. Taking these factors into account, along with Hooker's own ideas of what would be best, Hooker's initial plan pursued the primary goal of simply forcing Lee to retreat. Hooker's plan, as conceived in his own mind, could have satisfied the President's goal had Lee elected to stand and fight, and his own long-range goal of pursuing a divided enemy to Richmond, if Lee had withdrawn. Because he firmly believed Lee would retreat as expected, Hooker saw little value in considering alternatives, which resulted in his inability to adapt to the dramatic differences between what he thought would happen and what actually took place.

Hooker's subsequent inaction, when presented with favorable opportunities, reflected his continued attempt to maintain his original intent to achieve a "risk free" victory by avoiding a potentially costly offensive battle. Additionally, his reluctance to use the kind of forceful offensive tactics that had characterized his generalship at the division and corps level were a result of his changed views on warfare, which were significantly impacted by the Union Army's huge loss of life at Fredericksburg. Hooker did not think that frontal assaults against entrenched troops could succeed; therefore, instead of continuing to attack in the early phases of the battle, Hooker pulled back and spent the rest of the battle on the defensive. This resulted in a large portion of his army never becoming fully engaged, and it also meant that he ceded the initiative

to Lee. Once that happened, the battle was lost. Not because Hooker gave up, but due to Hooker's false assumptions and his steadfast belief in the feasibility of his plan to force Lee to withdraw. As Bruce Catton so correctly assessed, what Hooker planned "would have worked, against most generals. Against Lee it failed so completely that its basic excellence is too easily overlooked."⁹⁶

Hooker became almost bewildered when the rebels did not perform as he thought they would. This resulted in his rigid insistence on the defensive strategic maneuver and cautious offensive tactics that he continued to execute without success. He was narrow-minded in his operational thinking. In his mind, the actions he had predicted of Lee would eventually take place; he could not see the reality of the situation, even though it was occurring before his very eyes. Fully aware of Lee's supply situation, Hooker believed that if his lines were cut, he would have to respond to protect them by retreating. That Lee would choose to fight instead of retreat was beyond Hooker's consideration. When Lee responded contrary to Hooker's assumptions, Hooker refused to reassess the situation objectively, which could have allowed him to adopt a more suitable course of action. Instead, he continued to try to force his will on Lee by continuing with his failing original plan, which resulted in Hooker remaining off balance throughout the campaign.

The failure of one army and the success of the other in the Chancellorsville campaign, as at Fredericksburg, can be attributed more to the individual abilities and actions of the respective

⁹⁶ Herman Hattaway and Archer Jones, How the North Won, (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1983), 380.

commanders than to any other single factor or group of factors.⁹⁷ To say that Lee defeated the Army of the Potomac is misleading. Lee did not defeat the army; he defeated Hooker as he fought a very effective defensive battle that removed the Federal threat from Virginia thanks to Hooker's failings as an army commander.

Although Hooker helped to defeat himself, Lee's actions certainly had something to do with it. Lee's application of the principles of maneuver, surprise, and economy of force while aggressively dividing and attacking a numerically superior force were clearly keys to his successful commandery at Chancellorsville. The Army of the Potomac was not damaged to any great extent; it was quickly reorganized and was able to return successfully in the months ahead. However, the Army of the Potomac had not fought to its full potential at Chancellorsville basically because that was neither Hooker's plan nor his intent. Meade's V Corps was hardly engaged, nor was Reynolds' I Corps. Had Hooker relied on his council of Couch, Meade and Reynolds, the action probably would have produced a much different result.

The utilization of the Grand Division organization, which Hooker had recently eliminated, would have provided for a more effective command relationship and methodology, given Hooker's design of the campaign and the secrecy he maintained surrounding his plan and intent. Hooker, however, intended to exercise personal control over every action. This would prove to be impossible. While dividing his forces gave him tactical advantages, it also created significant command and control problems. By dividing his force into three widely dispersed columns, he rendered himself unable to effectively communicate and coordinate the efforts of his army throughout critical periods of the campaign.

⁹⁷ Stackpole, 73.

Additionally, one key element of Hooker's campaign was his plan to use the cavalry corps as a weapon of shock force. Hooker seemingly envisioned his newly formed cavalry corps performing in a manner similar to today's airborne units.⁹⁸ Their mission, as with today's forces, was to get behind enemy lines, create confusion, interdict supplies and communications, and harass the rear of the enemy and the interior of the enemy's countryside. However, their grand envelopment against the enemy's supply line failed. Even so, Hooker continued to believe that at any moment their actions would take shape in forcing Lee's hand. Their failure further compounded Hooker's situation, as he was left without the capability of employing his cavalry, with the exception of one small brigade under Pleasonton, for reconnaissance, flank security, or to exploit close-in local successes.

One lesson that Hooker's actions at Chancellorsville illustrate is the necessity to clearly communicate a plan's intended objectives and its intent, and to delegate responsibilities to subordinate commanders. A combined order to all wing and corps commanders would seem to have been the natural and wise thing to do, but that was not in Hooker's design for commanding the army. Instead, his major subordinate commanders were each given separate instructions, none knowing the missions of the others. In contrast, Lee demonstrated the advantages of his style of commandership, as one of his most characteristic traits was to permit a large measure of discretion and self-direction to his corps commanders, both in giving their views and in taking action. Hooker did not trust anyone but himself, and he felt he had to personally control every event. Additionally, he did not seek the advice of his staff or subordinates in formulating his plan. He did not reveal any more of his plan or intent than was absolutely necessary, and then

⁹⁸ Stackpole, 97-98, Ballard, 1013.

only reluctantly, in vague, abstract, fragmentary orders that were difficult for the corps commanders to interpret.

To a great extent, Hooker's generalship as an army commander resembled his leadership of troops at the division and corps levels. Hooker placed too much emphasis on personal leadership and overrated the influence he could wield with a huge army on a large battlefield, underrating the significance of organization to an army's effectiveness. I believe Major General Couch best summed up the events of Chancellorsville when he wrote:

"In looking for the causes of the loss of Chancellorsville, the primary ones were that **Hooker expected Lee to fall back without risking battle**. Finding himself mistaken he assumed the defensive, and was outgeneraled and became demoralized by the superior tactical boldness of the enemy."⁹⁹

⁹⁹ D. N. Couch, Major General, USA, Battles and Leaders of the Civil War, "The Chancellorsville Campaign" (New York: The Century Co. 1888), 336. Emphasis added.

Overview

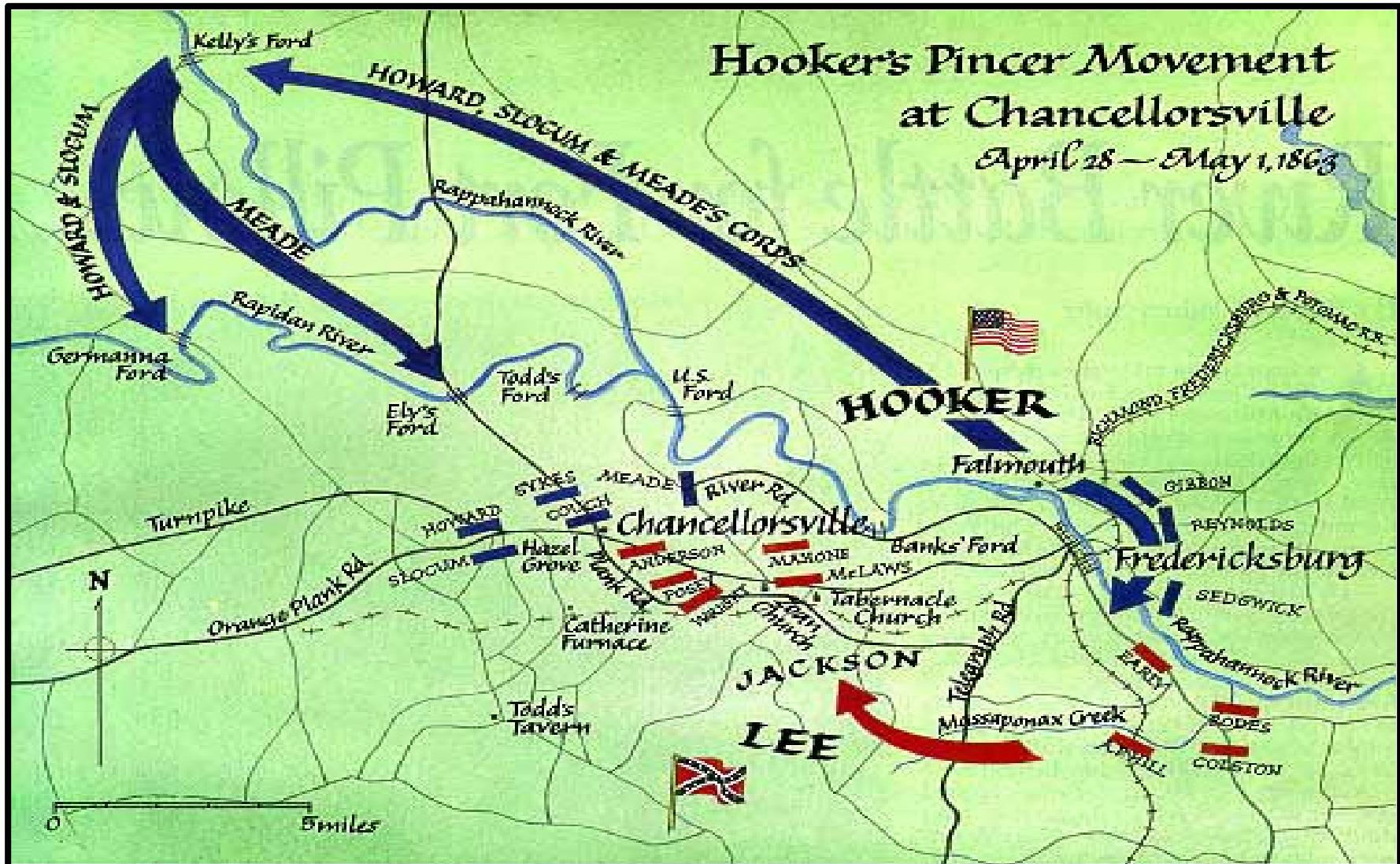


Figure 1

Joan Pennington, online Civil War images, 1997, URL: <http://www.thehistorynet.com/AmericasCivilWar/images/03964_71.htm>, accessed 10 December 2000.

April 27-30, 1863

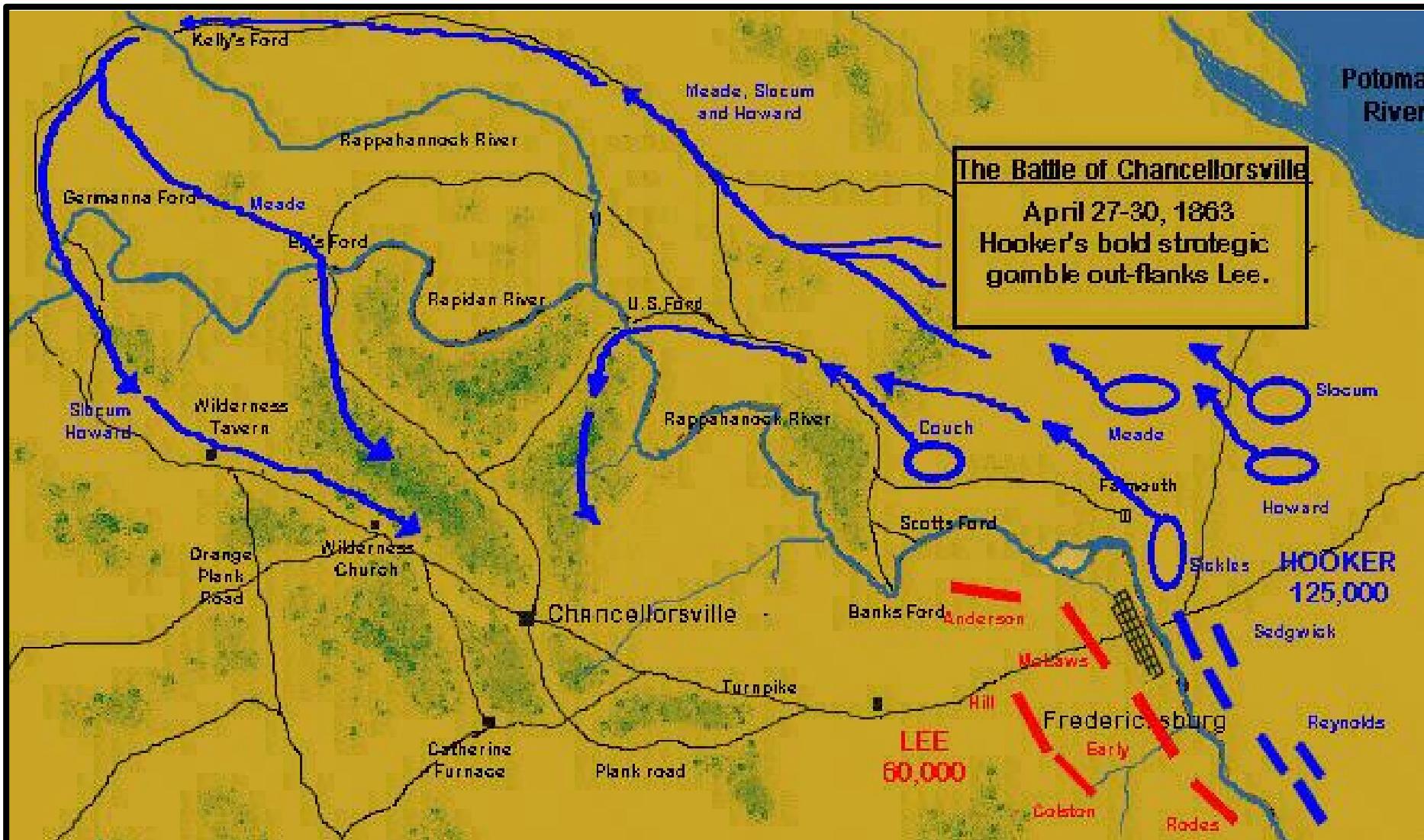


Figure 2

Andrew Carlstrom, online project, under "Chancellorsville," 1996, URL: <<http://history.acusd.edu/gen/projects/chancellorsville/MAPS/MAP1.JPG>>, accessed 10 December 2000.

May 1, 1863

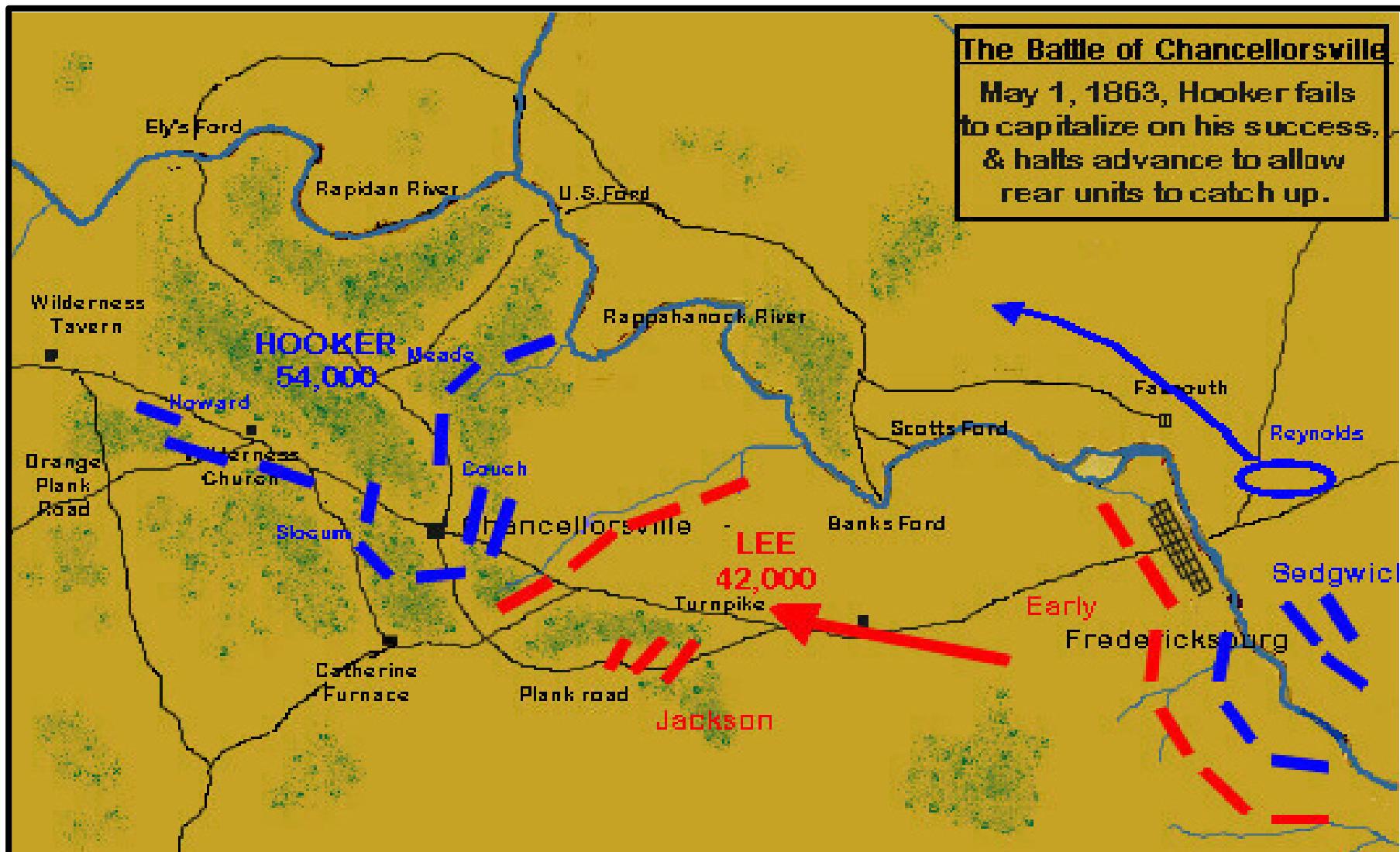


Figure 3

Andrew Carlstrom, online project, under "Chancellorsville," 1996, URL: <<http://history.acusd.edu/gen/projects/chancellorsville/MAPS/MAP2.JPG>>, accessed 10 December 2000.

May 2, 1863

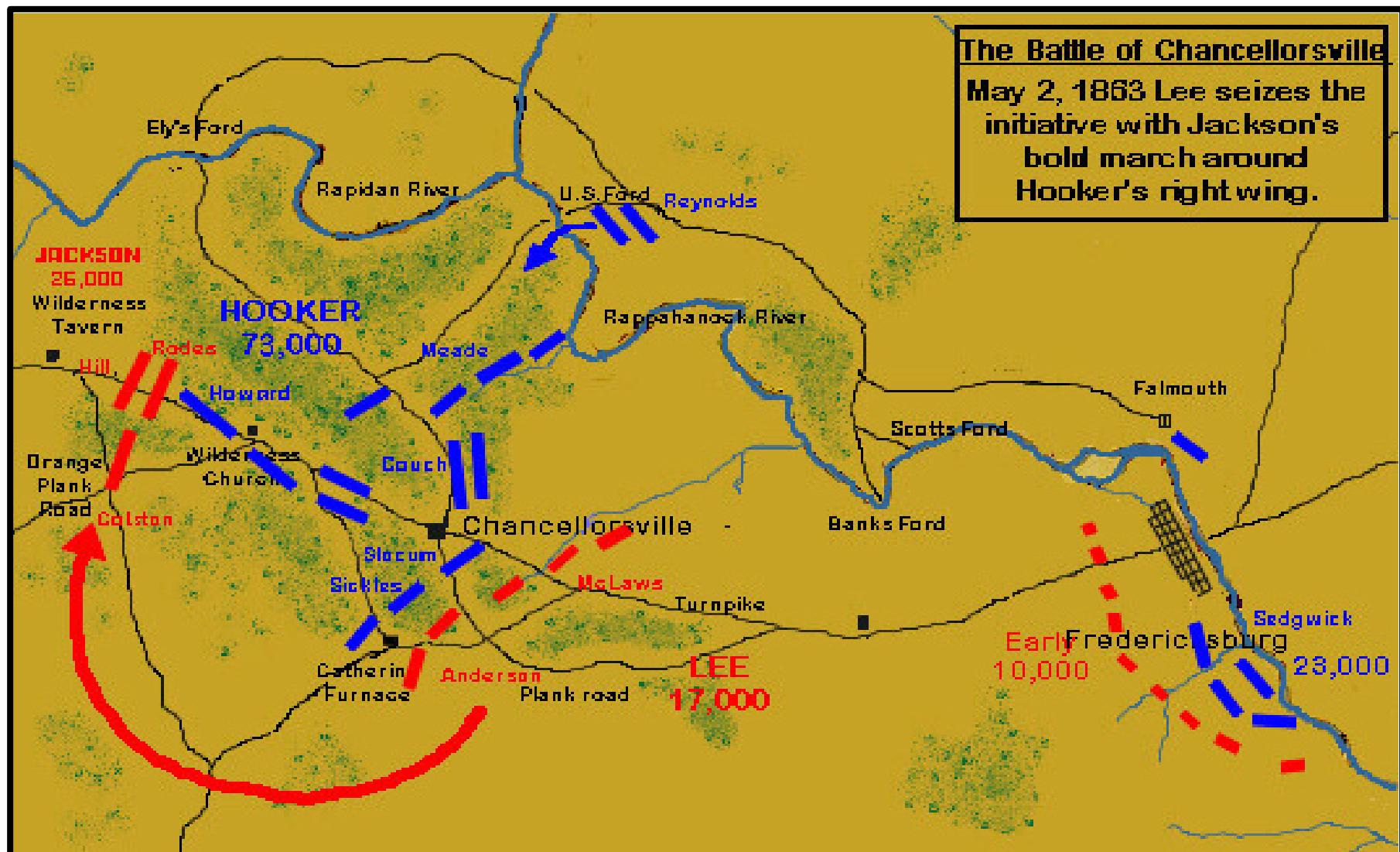


Figure 4

Andrew Carlstrom, online project, under "Chancellorsville," 1996, URL: <http://history.acusd.edu/gen/projects/chancellorsville/MAPS/MAP3.JPG>, accessed 10 December 2000.

May 3, 1863

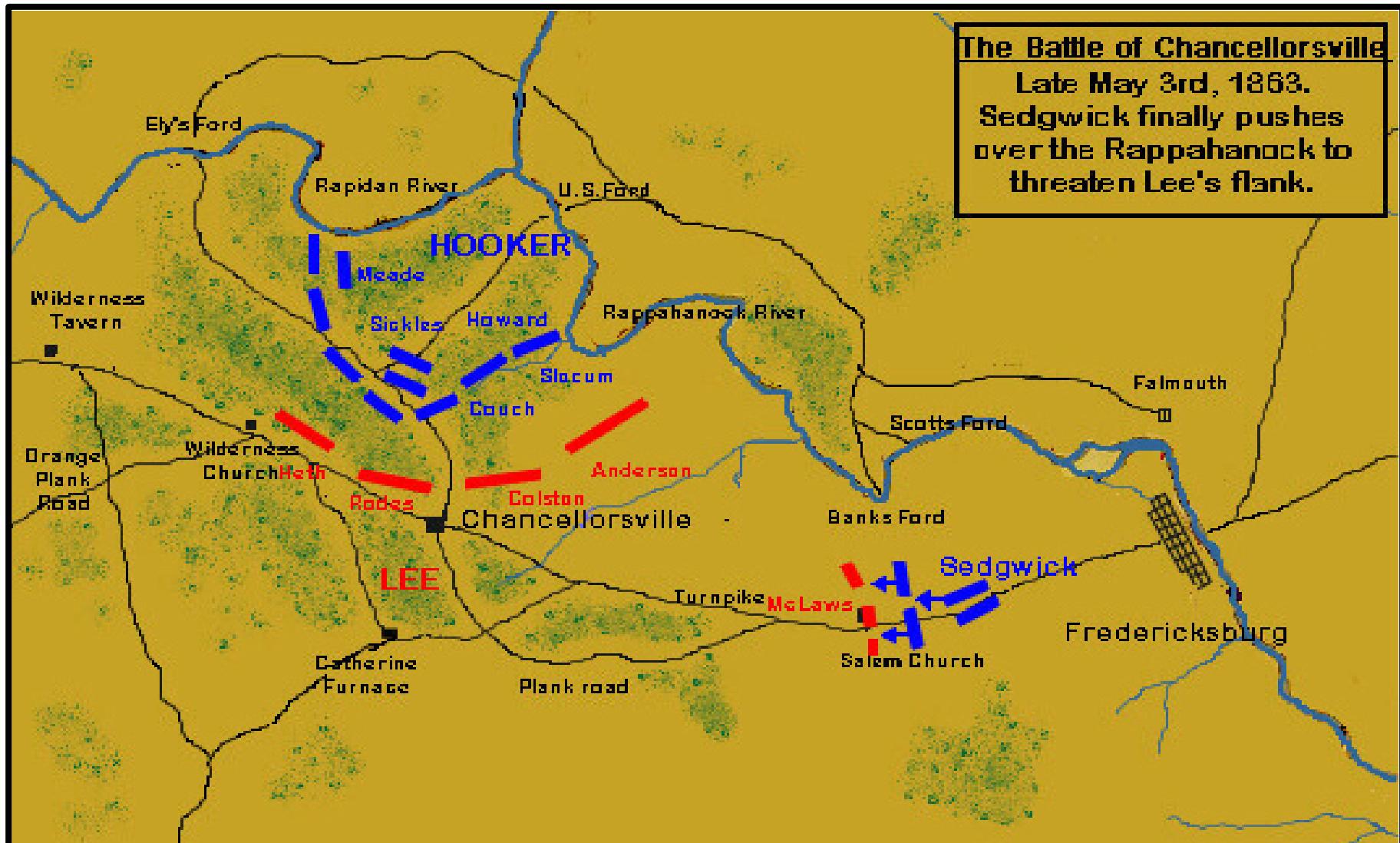


Figure 5

Andrew Carlstrom, online project, under "Chancellorsville," 1996, URL:
<<http://history.acusd.edu/gen/projects/chancellorsville/MAPS/MAP5.JPG>>,
accessed 10 December 2000.

May 4, 1863

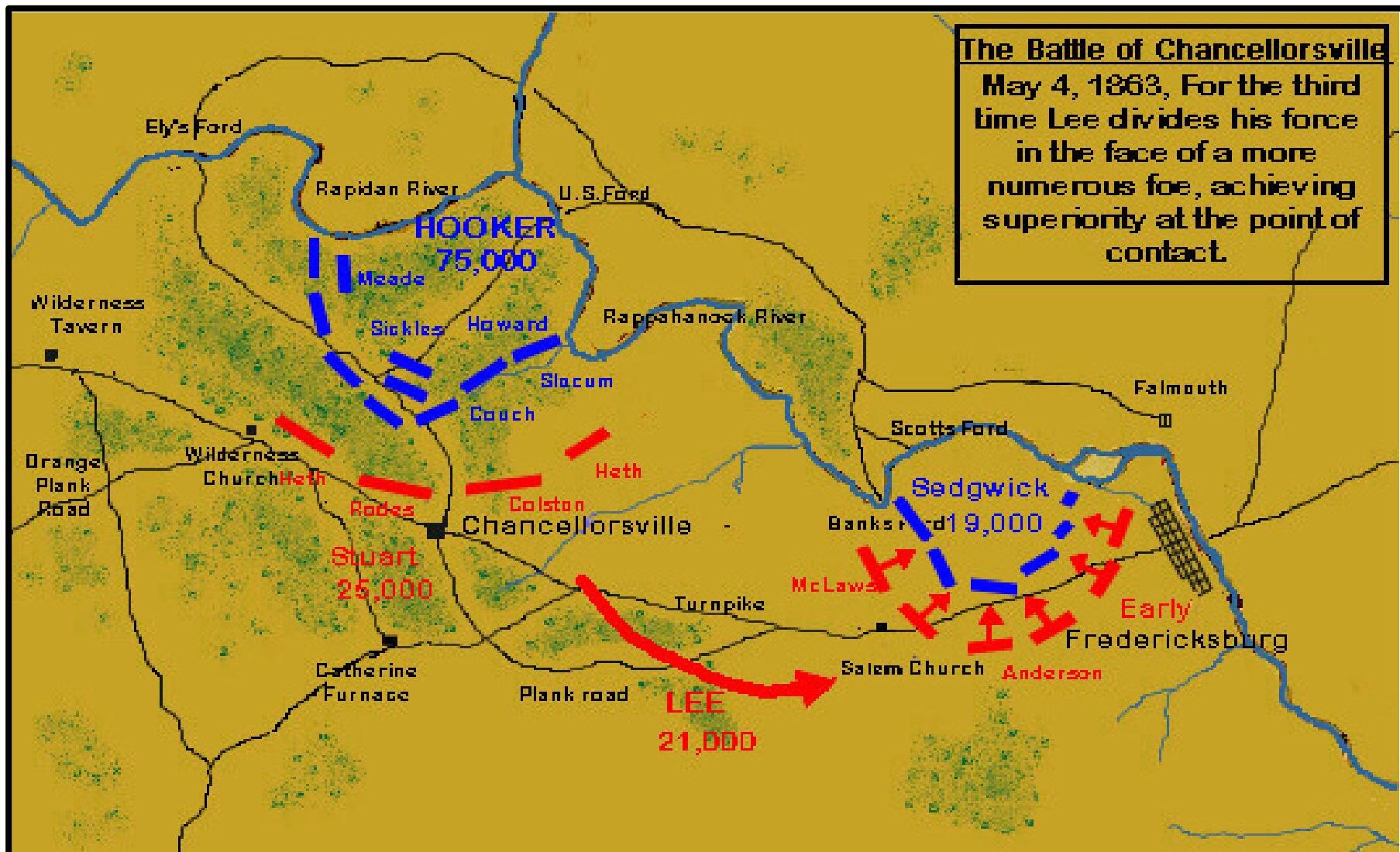


Figure 6

Andrew Carlstrom, online project, under "Chancellorsville," 1996, URL: <http://history.acusd.edu/gen/projects/chancellorsville/MAPS/MAP6.JPG>, accessed 10 December 2000.

May 6, 1863

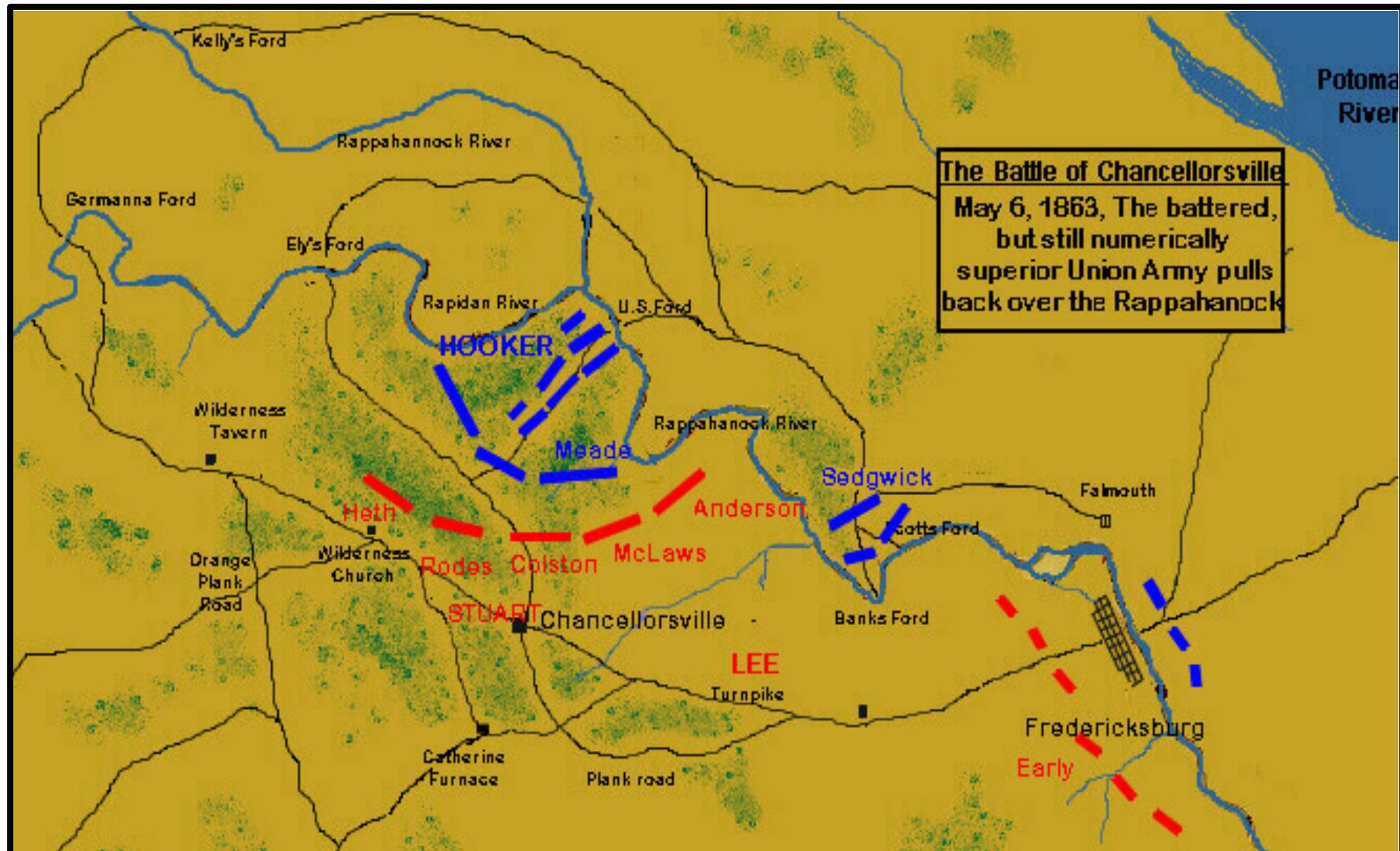


Figure 7

Andrew Carlstrom, online project, under "Chancellorsville," 1996, URL: <http://history.acusd.edu/gen/projects/chancellorsville/MAPS/MAP7.JPG>, accessed 10 December 2000.

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